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SHE LOOKED AHEAD AND SAW THE FORM OF A MAN RECUMBENT ON THE LEVEL ROCK.

OR,
**The Border Blacksmith's
Terrible Temptation.**

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "WILD WEST WALT," "DEEP DUKE,"
"YANK YELLOWBIRD," "CENTRAL PACIFIC
PAUL," "BORDER BULLET," "HOT
HEART," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

KIT TAKES A GREAT RISK.

A HUMAN life was in danger, and the chances of rescue appeared to be worse than remote; they seemed not to exist. The scene was full of excitement.

A fear-stricken, maddened horse was rushing across the prairie at full speed. His whole frame quivered with more than physical motion caused by his speed, and his distended eyes had a glare which told of reason for the time dethroned.

He was accompanied in his flight by a rider, whose helplessness was only equaled by her courage. A woman sat in the saddle, keeping her

place with admirable ease, her grasp on the rein never relaxing, her face showing none of the pallor usually seen in cases of known peril.

Had any one been there to look critically it might have been seen that she was fairer than the majority of women, but that went for nothing then. Beauty in distress may touch the hearts of men beyond their usual capacity for sympathy, but Fate shows no distinction in its grim awards.

Beyond the running horse was the area known as the Bottomless Pits—a region where vegetation was almost unknown, but where pointed rocks stood like massive bayonets by the side of deep crevasses and deeper canyons.

Only a few rods now separated the runaway from the danger, and it bade fair to end in a double tragedy. Neither horse nor rider could hope to escape when the latter's mad rush had carried them a few rods further. A fall down some crevice, or upon a pointed rock, would end it all.

The girl looked back. No human being was in sight. Her lips moved for a moment, then she faced to the front. She had decided to wait as long as possible, and then take her chances in a leap from the saddle. This did not promise much; with the horse going at his present speed, and with rough ground upon which to alight, it would be strange if she escaped serious injury or instant death.

A few plunges more and they were among the low bushes which fringed the line where prairie and rocks met.

The crisis was at hand.

This thought was in the girl's mind, but she was not prepared for what followed. One moment she saw only the forbidding outlook ahead; the next, a man arose in the path, and a hand was laid upon the rein with a giant's grasp! She would have said that it was impossible to check the maddened beast thus, and, indeed, the result was in doubt for a moment.

Some man had seen fit to risk his life to save her, and his courage did not waver, but the momentum of the runaway was not to be easily overcome. The rescuer was dragged back several feet, but he did not lose control of his strength. A momentary struggle; then the horse was forced upon his haunches, and held at the mercy of the man.

The latter bowed politely and spoke in a voice free from all emotion.

"I would suggest, miss, that you alight," he said, as though he was mentioning one of several ways.

She needed no second notice, and was standing on the ground almost before the man ceased speaking.

The steed renewed his struggles, but was held in a helpless position by those commanding arms.

"Playful, isn't he?" added the stranger.

"He is a vicious brute!" declared the girl. "Will you do me a favor?"

"Certainly."

"Shoot him."

"Why?"

"He has forfeited his right to live."

"Let me improve on your suggestion. Let me, if you please, purchase the horse as a memento of the occasion when I was fortunate enough to aid an interesting lady in peril."

The horse had grown quiet now, so the conqueror released his hold with one hand and bowed as he raised his hat. He was a dashing-looking young fellow, and might at that moment have made a strong impression upon almost any young lady, but this particular specimen of the sex did not receive the complimentary speech in good-humor.

She retreated a pace, and her handsome face grew suddenly cold.

"Excuse me, sir," she answered frigidly, "but Charon is not for sale. I have changed my mind, and will keep him myself."

"But he is vicious—"

"I will tame him."

"As you did to-day?"

The rescuer smiled in a jovial way as he made the good-humored retort, but she was not to be moved from her severe mood.

"I will break his will!" she firmly answered.

"As you wish, miss. I presume you live at the village?"

"Yes."

"I am an idle wanderer named Christopher Jameson. The name is rarely heard by me, though, for my friends call me 'Saddle-Chief Kit,' because they have a fancy I can ride a horse properly; and sometimes they add the romantic name of 'The Prairie Centaur.' There! I am introduced, you see."

He looked into her face with the true friend's frank smile, and she could not overlook the demands of courtesy.

"I am Czarina King," she answered, briefly.

"Mr. Jameson, I owe you thanks for your brave act. You saved my life at the peril of your own. I thank you warmly. Now I will go to the village."

She made a step toward Charon.

"Not on that brute, I hope."

"Why not?"

"He is dangerous—"

"I will subdue him," Czarina calmly replied.

"Pardon me, but my own horse is near. Take that, I beg of you, and let me ride Charon to the village."

"I think that my guardian, Reverend Tyngton Perham, would like to see and thank you. I should like to have you accompany me to Mr. Perham's house, but not upon Charon. He and I go together!"

Miss King spoke with decision. Her manner was not rude, but it was determined, and, also, unpleasantly cold for that of a beautiful woman.

She turned toward her horse, and Saddle-Chief Kit remonstrated no further. He surrendered the rein, and a convenient rock gave the girl opportunity to vault lightly into the saddle. Kit had expected another struggle, but the horse stood as meek as a mule.

For the time, at least, he was well subdued.

"Thank you for your invitation," observed Kit, easily, "and I will ride to town with you if you so wish. Wait one moment and I will produce my charger."

He walked a few steps away, disappeared in the bushes, and then re-emerged, leading a horse. Even then Czarina looked at the animal with admiration. He was of iron-gray color, and of large and powerful build, but it needed but one glance to discover that he had all the points which go to indicate speed.

"This is Samson," Kit announced; "the champion steed of the prairie. Possibly I will tell you more of him anon, but it need not be said now. He and I were in camp here when you appeared."

"Fortunately for me."

"Possibly you are right."

The speaker mounted lightly. He made a notable figure in the saddle, looking as impressive as his strong-limbed horse, but Czarina gave but little heed to either, from that time.

"We wait for you to lead the way," added the rescuer.

"The village lies yonder."

The girl pointed and started her horse, and Kit rode to her side.

"I've entered a good many towns of the West," he observed, "but never one in such fair company as I have now."

His manner was easy and good-humored, with a sufficient sprinkling of courtesy and respect to have pleased most women, but the woman of the present occasion frowned perceptibly.

"Mr. Jameson," she returned, "you have saved my life, and I trust I am not ungrateful, but I am compelled to reprove you just the same. I have heard it often remarked that most of my sex like flattery. I do not. Pray bear this in mind, and give me only sensible words. I detest compliments."

The rescuer bowed good-naturedly.

"Knowing this, I shall try to be commonplace."

He looked curiously at his companion as he spoke. He was one who admired women. By nature he was a trifle wild and reckless, though never given to lawlessness; and he could not have gone into raptures over a fine painting or a Tennyson poem. He admired Nature, horses and womankind, and, admiring, he was sure to express his views candidly and unreservedly.

This he had done, in a measure, on the present occasion, and it was a surprise to him that Czarina should not receive it kindly. In his opinion, a woman so fair ought to be worshiped, and, in return, ought to accept homage gracefully.

However, the prairie wanderer was a philosophical sort of a person, and accepted the inevitable and took consolation by looking at Czarina. She was well worthy of it.

Taller than the average of her sex, she had a form and face to compel admiration. The one was well-rounded and symmetrical; the other was remarkable for regularity of feature, clearness of complexion and all the lines of beauty. Yet, that face seemed to lack one charm; it was cold and commanding, rather than womanly; and it was clear that Czarina was not one to win the love of every person with whom she came in contact. She was a brunette, and her black hair was wonderfully abundant and glossy. Nature had done well for the fair heroine of that day's adventure.

If any one had told her that she and Saddle-Chief Kit made a fine couple she would have been offended, yet such was the fact.

He was a man one might well admire. Tall and strong, he was not overburdened with flesh nor with the awkwardness so often seen in large men. Living free from the trammels of society, he had the grace of ease and the quickness of a panther, to speak figuratively.

And Kit Jameson was as good-looking as a man ought to be. He had an honest, intelligent, pleasant-humored face, and his long, light-hued hair gave him a dashing appearance. Seen in the saddle he was at his best, for he rode like a Centaur, indeed.

He made an agreeable companion for proud Czarina, whether she would admit it or not.

"I believe," he remarked, as they went on, "that your village rejoices in the name of Si Gotch?"

"Yes."

"A very singular name."

"It does well enough."

"Si Gotch! Fit name for an Esquimaux rookery."

"No one is obliged to visit Si Gotch, if he does not like it."

"Glad to hear it; it is a truly beneficent law. I, however, so like Si Gotch, that I think I shall tarry there for a space, so to speak."

Czarina was silent.

"You are my only acquaintance there," added Kit, studying her face.

"Leave me out, too, if you please," returned the girl, with cold composure. "I owe you a debt of gratitude, and shall be glad to pay you if I can, but I am not addicted to society. Ask any one in the village and he, or she, will say no good of me. I am not bad, but the ways of other persons are not my ways. I am not social. I receive but few calls and make less; some persons say I am an iceberg. Being so unsocial, you will not feel that you have met with any loss when, on our arrival at the house of my guardian, I turn you over to him to be duly thanked, and, for my own part, retire to my customary seclusion."

At the conclusion of this remarkable speech Czarina condescended to turn her gaze upon her companion. He saw a pair of fine eyes, but they were as cold as her words and her manner.

"You can't be a mind-reader," answered Kit, boldly, "or you would not say that. You read me poorly; I shall feel that I have met with a loss. I have never met your esteemed guardian, but, though I dare say he is a very fine person, I should prefer your society to his."

"You speak rashly."

"Frankly, if you please."

"As you will; we will call it so. You save yourself a reproof by the amendment. Frankness I admire, and, as I practice it myself, I cannot blame you for using it; but you will have to keep it in due bounds. As for me, my company is at no man's disposal. I am a man-hater!"

"A what?"

"A man-hater."

"The dickens you are! What may that be?"

Czarina turned a severe look upon him.

"I do not think I need to explain. You look like an intelligent person, and, as such, you must understand."

"Upon second thought, I reckon I do; and I must say I pity my sex. All I can ask you is that you will not include me in the black-list. Give me the benefit of the doubt, and don't give me too black a brand."

"You will be treated as you deserve."

CHAPTER II.

THE CENTAUR MAKES A PROPHECY.

CZARINA touched her horse and quickened its pace. She evinced an inclination to lead Saddle-Chief Kit in the journey by a few feet, but he did not suffer his place to be lost. Samson's nose was kept even with Charon's but Kit allowed conversation to die out.

He was beginning to understand Czarina, and knew her to be a woman with a will and a hobby. Created to be an ornament to the world, she had set herself upon a pedestal from which she looked with austerity upon the world in general, and the male portion thereof in particular. She was not haughty, but she was severe.

Saddle-Chief Kit was disappointed, but not disgusted. He admired Czarina, and did not feel like condemning her because her views did not harmonize with his. He had a desire to worship her—candidly believing that beautiful women were made to be worshiped—but now it had become evident that he could only adore from a distance, he was thankful that he could assume that privilege.

He felt somewhat downcast, but his light, good-natured disposition stood as a friend, and he was not ready to despair.

After riding a short distance further the village of Si Gotch became visible. It needs no detailed description, for it was very much like the average of Western towns in days of infancy. Si Gotch was not large, but it was growing. It had never had a "boom," but was none the worse for that, and the boom was liable to arrive at any time.

Kit resumed conversation, and Czarina was fairly polite as they rode into the collection of houses. She led the way at once to her home, and a very yellow Chinaman appeared to take her horse. She asked him to do the same with her escort's, but Kit declined the offer and left Samson before the door.

They then entered the dwelling, and had barely reached the sitting-room when another man made his appearance. His look and bearing were so ministerial that Kit did not need the introduction to recognize him, but it was duly given, nevertheless.

"Mr. Jameson, this is my guardian, the Reverend Tyngton Perham. This gentleman, uncle, has done me a great favor. Charon ran away with me and nearly broke my neck."

Mr. Perham had cordially offered his hand, but the last announcement so upset him that he threw up both hands, instead.

"Bless me!" he ejaculated.

"I presume you can make Mr. Jameson feel that we are not ungrateful, uncle."

"Dear me, yes."
 "I will leave it to you."
 With which remark Czarina bowed politely to Kit and left the room.
 "A fine day, partner," remarked Kit, seeing that the minister was not in a composed mood.
 "Decidedly so, sir; but how far did he run?"
 "Meaning the horse?"
 "Yes, sir."
 "I can't give the distance, but he slung his hoofs in lively style and come near breaking the record."
 "And Czarina was endangered?"
 "She had a tolerably close call, sir."
 "Were you near?"
 "I was somewhere around."
 "How did it end?"
 "The horse sat down to rest."
 "Bless me, why did he do that?"
 Kit smiled. He perceived that the Reverend Mr. Perham was as peculiar in his way as was his beautiful ward, but those ways were totally different. Mr. Perham was probably a good man, but he lacked practical sense. He was now confused, and as he seemed likely to flounder around for some time if not helped out of the confusion, the younger man came to the point and gave an account of the adventure.
 His own conduct was made incidental, but Perham did not fail to appreciate it at its full value. He was shocked to learn that the girl had been in such danger, and his warmest friendship went out to the man who had saved her.
 He grasped both of Kit's hands and thanked him over and over again, until the prairie rover interrupted, in his usual airy way:
 "Don't mention it, partner; the young lady and I settled all that. Suppose you and I sit down and talk on other subjects—"
 "Dear me, how forgetful of me! To be sure, we will sit down, and I trust you will pardon me for not thinking of it. But, I was really severely upset. Be seated, sir, by all means."
 The minister placed a chair for his companion, and after a good deal of ceremony, they were at last seated opposite each other. Even then Perham did not seem at ease. He rarely was at ease: being peculiarly organized, he was himself peculiar at all times, but he was courteous and well meaning.
 Once more he wanted to hear about the adventure, and Kit obliged him, as though he was addressing a child. Then Perham rallied somewhat, looked around the room and observed:
 "Czarina left us abruptly."
 "I see she is gone."
 "She is peculiar."
 "Possible?"
 "We are not all formed alike, mentally," added the minister, lowering his voice, "and we cannot expect women to be like men. You and I, sir, are made of iron; we are strong-willed, self-reliant and methodical. All of the weaker sex are different, and Czarina is eccentric."
 He glanced toward the door as he spoke, as though fearful that he would be overheard, and Jameson had a strong suspicion that he stood in awe of his beautiful ward.
 "The freaks of the fair sex are our pleasure," Kit gallantly declared.
 "Ye-es," Perham slowly admitted. "By the way, did Czarina thank you?"
 "Oh! yes."
 "I thought she would."
 "That was all right."
 "I hope you will not think strange of her leaving the room as she did. One of her foibles is to shun society, especially that of—of—"
 "Men?"
 "Have you suspected it?"
 "She told me she was a man-hater."
 "Dear me! how abrupt!"
 "That's nothing; she'll outgrow it; and she will be all the more affectionate when married and settled down."
 "I think she will never marry."
 "I think she will marry inside of a year. I have the man picked out, now!"
 "Bless me! you can't mean it!"
 "But I do."
 "May I ask who he is?"
 "You may. I'm the man!"
 "You?"
 "Exactly."
 "But I thought you and she had but just met."
 "Quite right. Our acquaintance does not date far back, which is all the more favorable. The more folks know about one another, the more they know against them. Miss King and I start under very favorable circumstances, in that we are but little acquainted. You will see us make a match of it."
 "But I don't understand—"
 "Oh! you see I have taken a fancy to her."
 "She will not consent."
 "Why not?"
 "She is a—man-hater."
 "Opinions change—hers will."
 "And you are really in earnest?"
 "I am."
 There was a period of silence, during which the two men looked at each other, each in his

own peculiar way. Kit was cool, easy, smiling and confident, but not in any degree offensive; while Perham was surprised, confused and uncertain. He had had considerable experience with Czarina, himself, and was of the opinion that only a madman would dream of taming her spirit or changing her views.

Tyrington Perham was not a confident or practical man. As a preacher he was a success, for he had a degree of eloquence, was at home in theology, and could, and did, set a good example. He was at his ease in the pulpit, and with his books, but, beyond that, he was a boat drifting without guidance on the sea of life.

He had seen about sixty years of life, but his simple, temperate mode of living had left him well preserved. His once-black hair was very gray, and his face wrinkled, but his physical strength was unimpaired.

All his life he had been fond of problems—in books. In Czarina he had found a problem equally pleasing, in a certain way, but impossible to solve. He now had another in Saddle-Chief Kit, and did not know whether to regard the young man as of sound mind or not.

Studying the face before him, he was led from the subject.

"I do not remember having seen you before in Si Gotch, sir," he remarked.

"I was never here before."

"May I ask where you live?"

"In the West. A good-sized bedroom, isn't it? In brief, I am a rover. With my horse I go where my fancy leads me. I have neither chick nor child, home nor business, cares nor relatives. When you see me, you see all there is of us."

"Dear me! how strange!"

"Isn't it?"

"You must meet with many dangers."

"I do."

"Are you not afraid?"

"Of what?"

"Wild beasts and lawless men."

"Not a hair. Sometimes they try to bridle me and ride on my back, but I kick like a Maverick steer and they can't hang to the saddle. There's nothing like good, old-fashioned, double-barreled pluck, parson!"

Mr. Perham shook his head and sighed. He could not properly follow this airy talk, and he had some doubt whether he understood all, but he rather liked the gay young borderer, and was not inclined to look on the dark side.

"Well," added Kit, straightening up, "time is flying, and I shall have to tear myself away for the present. I shall, however, remain in Si Gotch for some days to come."

"In that case, I hope you will call again. You have rendered a great service to Czarina, and we are not ungrateful, believe me. Call, and our poor hospitality is at your service."

"Thank you; I will drop around."

The rover arose and moved toward the door. Mr. Perham saw him out with all the courtesy which was an inbred part of his nature. Samson had remained standing obediently where he had been left, and when Kit had inquired the way to the hotel, he vaulted into the saddle and galloped away. Perham had seen many men ride, but even his usually unobserving eyes detected the fact that his late visitor rode with surprising ease and grace, and it caused him to nod commendation.

"An odd young man, but quite admirable in his way. I do not fully understand these men of the West; but if I were again young, I dare say I should be like them—perhaps."

The last word was well added, and the speaker realized the fact, for he could sit the saddle only with great difficulty, while with the rifle and revolver he had never been able to hit the largest target.

Saddle-Chief Kit had gained considerable influence upon his mind, and he did not leave the door until the rider was out of sight. Then he went inside and met Czarina in the hall.

"Is your visitor gone, uncle?" she asked, quietly.

"Yes, Czarina. You were not here to bid him good-day."

"No."

"Don't you think it would have been well?"

"You were there, were you not?"

"Certainly."

"Then, what more could he ask?"

"But—excuse me, Czarina—he saved your life, you know."

"And I thanked him for it."

CHAPTER III.

CZARINA TALKS OF CASH.

GUARDIAN and ward were looking and acting in their usual way. The former was gentle and uncertain, and he had no intention of reproving Czarina. He was merely suggesting, and that, too, in an apologetic manner, that it would have been better for her to give more attention to her rescuer. She, on the other hand, had no apology to make for the past or present. She was as calm, self-reliant and decided as usual, yet, as usual, her manner was free from what was overbearing and offensive.

"And I thanked him for it," she asserted, steadily.

"True," Perham admitted, meekly.

"Did you do your part?"

"Ye-es; I thanked him, too."

"Did you do no more?"

"What more could I do?"

"Didn't you offer to pay him?"

"I fail to comprehend."

"You should have given him what money he thought due him for his service. Do you mean to say that you failed to do this?"

Perham shifted his position uneasily.

"He did not look like a man who could be paid with money, Czarina. He seemed to me to be a gentleman, and such men would be offended by the offer of money."

The girl's eyes glittered ominously.

"Are we to remain that man's debtors?"

"I don't think he regards us as owing him anything."

"He did me a service, he must be paid in money!"

Czarina spoke with determination which alarmed her guardian, and he hastily replied:

"I beg that you will abandon that idea. If your rescuer had been a rude miner the idea would, of course, be the proper one, but a gentleman—and Mr. Jameson is that—is not to be paid in money. Besides, he expressed deep admiration for you, and spoke of appearing as your suitor."

When the last statement first took shape in his mind the minister had hailed it as a happy thought, but he began to have some doubts before it was ended, and the instant the words were spoken he was warned by the sudden flashing of Czarina's eyes that he had made a grave mistake.

"What?" she cried.

"Eh?"

"What do you mean by his 'appearing as my suitor'?"

"I mean—well, he thought—"

"Do you mean that he dared to speak of me in a matrimonial light?"

"He did so respectfully—most respectfully," stammered Perham.

Czarina gazed at the confused old man in a way which made him have a vague feeling that lightning was hovering over his head.

"And what did you say?"

"I ventured to say that I did not think you cared to marry."

"Ventured!" repeated the girl, in a voice of subdued passion. "'Ventured!' Why didn't you drive him from the house?"

"My dear! my dear! you forget yourself. He was very kind and respectful."

"Yet, I told the man I was a man-hater!"

"Possibly he thought you were joking."

"Didn't you tell him the same?"

"Yes, but—"

"Did he persist?"

"Well, he seemed to be—a—in earnest—"

"I am answered. Uncle, I have one favor to ask of you. The next man who speaks to you of matrimony in connection with me, send him to me at once. I will answer him. As for this long-haired Don Quixote, I think he can be convinced that I was not joking. Within this hour he shall be paid in money for the service rendered me, and then sent about his business!"

Her manner was not violent, nor was there a marked show of temper, but it was so determined that Tyrington Perham, who knew her well, was more than ever dismayed.

He trembled to think what Czarina might do in the case.

At that moment the Chinese servant chanced to pass, and the girl addressed him sharply:

"Harp Moy, have my horse saddled and at the door in two minutes!"

The Chinaman stared stupidly.

"Bleg pardon, but—"

"You heard me. Obey."

She pointed imperiously toward the quarter where stood the stable, and Harp Moy looked alarmed and beat a sudden retreat.

"Czarina," feebly remonstrated Perham, "are you really going to Mr. Jameson?"

"I am."

"But consider—"

"The man has had the audacity to insult a woman he never saw until to-day by talking of matrimony, and that, too, when he knew she was a hater of his kind! He has lost all claims to the consideration you say is due a gentleman, and he shall be treated as what he is—a person of low, unrefined nature. He shall accept a money reward and never address us again!"

The speaker had donned her hat and was buttoning one glove around her shapely arm. Plainly, she was going to the field of battle, and going in a belligerent mood. Perham sunk into a chair and regarded her helplessly. He was totally unable to stem the torrent which was foaming around him.

Czarina did not lose her outward calmness. Angry as she was, her self-control continued; her voice did not rise above its usual pitch; and she did not lose the grace which was her birth-right. Of the two she was more beautiful than usual, for the flush of anger gave a rich coloring to her smooth young cheeks.

Even the meek Mr. Perham observed her beauty, but he had before then paid the same tribute to a caged panther.

The most noticeable difference was that Czarina was not caged.

Harp Moy hurried the horse to the door, and, in a few seconds, Charon was galloping away down the street with Miss King holding the rein as coolly as though the animal had not put her life in jeopardy once that day.

The Reverend Tyrington Perham watched her with expanded eyes and an elongated face.

"What—what will come next?" he groaned.

The question was timely. For years Czarina and her foibles had dismayed and confused his simple mind, but events seemed going from bad to worse at a hard gallop.

"Well might he ask, 'What next?'"

"Dear me, dear me!" he added, this is dreadful. She will hurt the feelings of Mr. Jameson, who is a most estimable gentleman, and all for nothing. I am afraid she is inclined to be willful. Bless me, I never knew before that girls were so queer!"

This was a happy turn of thought, as it furnished one of the problems with which he was fond of grappling, and, launched upon the formidable question, "Why are girls so queer?" he forgot about the individual case of peculiarity and soared away happily in a realm of conjecture.

Even there he was interrupted.

Harp Moy, who understood his master as well as he did his mistress, had softly closed the door, but a knock there aroused the minister, and he arose and opened it.

Two women and a man were revealed to his gaze.

All seemed to be strangers, but strangers were common in Si Gotch, and he bowed courteously.

"How do you do? Will you come in?" he asked.

The foremost applicant—it was a woman, and she was of middle-age—nodded shortly in reply, and promptly crossed the threshold. None of the party seemed to be in a sociable mood, but Perham knew what was due even strangers from a preacher of the Gospel, and he ushered them into the sitting-room. His invitation to accept seats had barely been made when all were seated.

"Now, I am at your service," he added.

"You're the parson, I take it," observed the middle-aged woman, and as her manner was in no degree questioning, it was plain that she knew such to be the fact.

"I am, madam."

"Tyrington Perham."

"That is my name."

"You're about the kind o' bird I expected to see!"

The minister made a visible start. He had become accustomed to blunt speeches since he located in the West, but this particular one was coarse as well as blunt; and there was an insolent air of triumph in the woman's manner which did not escape his notice.

"I fail to comprehend," he responded.

"I remember you of old, ye see."

Perham looked at the speaker in surprise.

"You remember me?"

"So I said."

"Then we have met before?"

"Rather!"

"I do not remember you."

"No? Now, then, Tyrie, I wouldn't 'a' thought that o' you!"

The woman regarded him with a malicious twinkle of her black eyes—and brilliant eyes they were, though she could lay claim to no other point of attractiveness. Perhaps she had been good-looking once, but she was now a ponderous person as far as body went, with a good fifty pounds of superfluous flesh; and her broad face was coarse, red and vulgar.

"You will have to prompt me," suggested Perham, beginning to feel ill at ease.

"To think that he should thus forget his old friends!" mocked the woman.

"There are none so blind as them who won't see," observed the young man.

"I assure you I do not remember, but I dare say you at one time resided in some town where I had a pastoral charge."

The elder woman laughed unmusically.

"Hear the old innocent! He's just as green as when he used ter come courtin' me!"

Perham's eyes dilated.

"Madam, who are you?" he demanded.

"Esther Harkins was my name once."

The minister sunk further back in his chair. He did not look alarmed, but it was clear that the news called up unpleasant recollections. He gazed at the woman in a confused way.

"Why, Tyrie, you don't seem glad to see me," she added, sarcastically.

"Oh! as to that, I—I am not displeased."

"How ingenuous!" she cried, with a short laugh. "Well, you were not 'displeased' when you used to come courtin' me."

The nearest approach to a frown appeared on Perham's face that had been seen there for a long time. Her coarseness grated upon his sensitive nature.

"Knowin' how fond you used ter be o' me," she added, "I've dropped in ter see you—you an' our fair Czarina!"

CHAPTER IV.

SERPENTS ENTER EDEN.

AGAIN did Tyrington Perham start, and this time there was more than unpleasant surprise in his manner. Alarm, clear and strong, was expressed on his mild face.

"You do not answer," continued Esther, after a pause, which was painful to the minister.

"No."

"Perhaps you will send for Czarina an' let her answer for herself."

"She is away."

"We saw her this mornin'."

"I do not mean that she is away from the village. She is in the place, and will soon return."

"We shall be glad ter see her."

"I—I do not think she will wish to meet you," answered Perham, with an air of desperation.

"Have you ever told her of us?"

"No."

"Then don't speak for her. I fancy we shall all be good friends. We have come ter stay fur a few weeks or such a matter."

The minister turned pale.

"But I do not think we have any accommodations."

"Your house is large."

"Our resources are small."

"We are willin' ter put up with some inconvenience in order ter be near her."

"She will repay us," added the young man, with an emphatic nod.

"Woman!" cried Perham, with a surprising energy, "what is your purpose in coming here?"

"The question seems unnecessary," answered Esther coolly, "but you shall have an answer. It is a good many years sence I have seen Czarina, and, o' late, I have felt a hankerin' ter be nigh her. Can you wonder at it?"

Perham's hands trembled as they rested upon his knees, but he was clearer-minded than was to be expected. He glanced questioningly at the young man and young woman who kept Esther company. The latter understood the glance and added:

"You needn't be afeard ter speak in their presence; they are my children. My name ain't Harkins any longer; it is Esther Bastion, an' these are my children, David an' Pansy."

She looked at the young couple with manifest pride, but it seemed groundless. David was a short, ill-formed man of about twenty-one years. His face was as coarse as his mother's, and wholly devoid of intelligence. His coarse, black hair grew low down upon his forehead; his eyes were small and set under bulging brows; his nose was broad and flat; his lips were heavy and thick, and were it not for an all-pervading look of cunning, one might have thought him underwitted.

The girl who rejoiced in the name of Pansy fitted that fanciful name about as well as girls usually do when they labor under such a load. Nature is a patient and long-suffering servant, but when children are robbed of sensible names and sent out into the world with idiotic substitutes, Nature will now and then revolt and show how far she can draw the distinction between the name and the bearer thereof.

Pansy was a "pansy" only by name. She was a thin, awkward, insignificant girl, who could never hope to be a pleasant feature in the flower-garden of her sex. Her hair was the opposite of her brother's, being an almost colorless brown; her features were quite as coarse and unsymmetrical as David's; and a generous crop of freckles gave color, if not ornament, to her face.

Her face was fairly intelligent, but it was one which told of a vicious, peevish disposition.

"Speak freely before my olive branches," directed Mrs. Bastion. "You will know them well before we leave you."

Tyrington Perham straightened his figure with sudden firmness.

"Madam, why have you come here?" he demanded, almost peremptorily.

"To see Czarina."

"Why do you wish to see her?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Do you remember your promise?"

"What promise?"

"You agreed to go away and never see her again."

"True."

"Will you break that promise?"

"I'm afraid I must, Tyrie," and the woman smiled in an offensive way.

"This is unjust!" declared Perham.

"Remember that I am a mother."

"In heavens name, forbear!"

"As you will."

"I call upon you," continued Perham, with growing energy, "to keep the promise which was sealed by giving money to you freely."

"It is all gone."

"That does not affect the compact."

"Yes, it does, hugely."

"You were paid your own price."

"Now, Tyrie, don't go on that way," advised Esther, coolly. "You really hurt my feelings."

How unjust to try ter send me flyin', bag an baggage, an' you was once my lover true."

"Forbear!"

"Besides, there is the matter of Czarina. I want ter see her; I must see her."

"You shall not, with my permission!" declared Perham, with firmness which surprised himself.

"What'll you do?"

"Keep her from seeing you."

"How'll you do it?"

"Direct her not to enter your presence."

"How cruel! Then, again, have you measured the result?"

"The result?"

"So I said."

"What do you mean?"

"Tyrie, I am only a weak woman"—the speaker extended one ponderous arm—"but I have a will of my own. Try ter block me in this case, an' Czarina shall know the whole truth!"

"That's the medicine!" agreed David.

"Speak clearly," directed Perham.

"I will, Tyrie. Just at present I an' my children here are in hard luck an' short of cash. Moreover, we are weary an' need rest. Now, parson, ef you will open your house ter us, introduce us ter Czarina as old friends o' yourn—me, I mean—an' give us shelter an' our keep, we will settle down here peaceful as so many cosset lambs, an' never a word will we say to Czarina about her peculiar history. We swop silence fur shelter."

"For how long?"

"A week, mebbe; mebbe more."

Perham rubbed his forehead in a perturbed way.

"That's one side o' the bargain," added Esther.

"And the other?"

"Is not so pleasant. Your refusal ter let us stay will be like hanging up a red flag, an' you kin bet your bottom dollar we stand ready ter do some tall gorin'!"

"Again, speak plainly."

"I'll tell Czarina the whole racket."

"Sound as Gibraltar!" affirmed David.

"We mean business," supplemented the fair Pansy.

"This is equivalent to blackmail," protested Perham, warmly.

"Call it anything you want ter; you know now jest what we are here for. All the good we kin get out o' tellin' Czarina the facts is ter worry you an' make her life miserable, an' to show up them old-time events. Precious little good all that will do us, though it will do somebody else a heap o' harm. Our gain lays in keepin' mum, an' we will do it ef you say the word. How is it, Tyrie, will you shelter us a short time?"

Esther leaned back in her chair, spread out her ample skirts, threw back her arms and looked like a full-rigged ship under sail. She smiled upon the minister, too, but the smile which had made his heart palpitate in the days of callow youth had lost its charm.

Perham did not fail to appreciate the situation at its actual value. Years before he had learned that she was thoroughly evil at heart, and her smiles did not now hide the fact that she was a bitter enemy who meant to rule or ruin.

What was he to do?

"Suppose that I accede to your demands," he finally responded, "what proof have I that you will keep your promise?"

"Our word."

David smiled. The joke was too good to be resisted.

"And you agree not to—to reveal any unpleasant facts to Czarina?" asked Perham.

"We do."

"How long do you wish to remain here?"

"A week or so."

The minister hesitated. He was considering the advisability of admitting serpents to his Eden, and he was wise enough to discern two facts. First, it would cease to be an Eden when they were admitted; secondly, the serpents could do a good deal of damage when once they were within fully.

"Possibly," went on the arch-serpent, "it would not worry Czarina ef she knew o' the past?"

"Don't speak of it!" Perham exclaimed. "It would kill her!"

"Hum! Does she pass as a relative of yours?"

"Merely as my ward, but she calls me uncle."

"Don't you wish you were?"

"Czarina is a noble girl."

"Like her mother."

"Forbear!" cried Perham, hastily.

"You are sensitive as to her relations, I see."

"Woman, goad me no further. Oh! my poor Czarina, what will come next?"

"A father, mebbe!" Esther sneered.

"No more!" commanded Perham, and for once there was something in his manner that checked her reckless speech.

"Well, we stay, do we?"

The firmness vanished from the minister's nature. He felt as though all the pleasures of life had left his presence.

"You may stay," he answered, in a low, unsteady voice.

"All right, parson. Children, make yourselves at home!"

David tossed his hat upon the table, walked to Mr. Perham's sofa and lay down in a position more easy than graceful; while both women, too, proceeded to "make themselves at home."

The helpless host looked on in mute agony. What changes a little time had brought forth! The harmony of his life had been disturbed, his home had been invaded, a dangerous secret was on the brink of exposure, and Czarina's happiness was threatened.

Perham glanced out of the window.

Up the street Czarina, herself, was coming at a gallop. The moment of her meeting with the undesired visitors was at hand. What would be the result?

CHAPTER V.

A MAN INSENSIBLE TO GOLD.

AFTER leaving the minister's residence Saddle-Chief Kit went to the hotel, secured quarters and registered. His residence he put down as "The Saddle." Possibly the landlord supposed this to be a town located at some point to him unknown, but he asked no questions, and Kit did not explain that the saddle in question was that which usually rested on Samson's back.

The rover had settled down and was enjoying himself with his pipe when an unexpected word was brought him.

"A lady in the parlor to see you."

"To see me?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am C. Jameson."

"She asked for Mr. Jameson. It is Miss Czarina King!"

Kit felt a strong impulse to vent his surprise in a whistle, but, instead, he arose with dignity and put his pipe away.

"Here's a dollar for your trouble, waiter," he composedly returned; and then made his way to the parlor.

Czarina was there, but not taking her ease. She remained standing, and in one hand she held her riding-whip. The tumult of her mind was photographed on her face, and Kit at once knew that, for some reason, a storm was brewing. He had seen storms before—storms of air and storms of women—and he bowed serenely.

"I am happy to see you, Miss King."

"Sir, I have just come from Mr. Perham," announced Czarina, with her queenliest air.

"I trust he is well."

"He has told me of a singular piece of negligence on his part at his late interview with you."

"Indeed! I was not aware that he neglected anything."

"He owed you something and did not pay you."

"There is a mistake somewhere. If he ever owed me anything he has paid it."

"You are wrong. He owed you for saving me from danger, and he did not pay."

"Excuse me, but he paid me fully."

"How?"

"By thanking me. Even that was not necessary, but he is a polite man—"

"Thanks make a poor payment. Mr. Perham was acting for me, and I do not pay debts with words. You did me a service. I desire you to set your price in money."

Thus far Czarina had remained calm, but her manner was imperious, and it was evident that she was only keeping her composure by a strong effort. Kit's pride was ruffled, but he smiled into her face with his usual buoyant good humor.

"It's too late to talk of money. The account is closed."

"It must be reopened."

"That would not be business-like."

"Do not try to put me off with empty words!" commanded Miss King, with growing imperiousness. "I am not here for idle talk. My guardian has told me of his singular neglect to pay you, and I am here to settle the debt. Name your price!"

"In money?"

"Yes."

"Hard to do. My time and labor would bring nothing in market. That makes one extreme. The other is the actual value of your safety, which, considering who you are, would foot up about equal to Solomon's wealth—"

"Be still! I want no idle flattery."

"I have none to give."

"Once more, will you set your price?"

"No. For you I have the deepest respect, Miss King; for your money, I have only contempt!"

"Contempt!"

"When you use it to buy my honor—yes!"

The rover's manner had grown grave, and it was plain that delicacy required the subject to be dropped, but Czarina remembered the unlucky speech of her guardian—his statement that Kit Jameson had dared to aspire to her hand—and all that was generous in her nature was closed to Kit's bid for just usage.

"I fail to understand," she returned.

"I saw you, a woman, in peril; I gave my poor aid; you thanked me; the account was squared. Do you imagine that, at any time, my

services could have been secured for dollars and cents? Do I look like a man whose soul is bound up in cents? If I do, I hope I shall speedily be made over!"

He spoke earnestly, and Czarina showed some embarrassment. Hers was not a hard heart, try as she would to make it seem so, and willful though she was; and as she was really in accord with these sentiments, she would have yielded her point had she not remembered Christopher Jameson's daring claim to appear as her suitor.

This she could never forgive.

And he had known she was a man-hater!

"Sir," she answered, more leniently, "you do not lower your high standard by doing as I wish in this matter. You only oblige me."

"Ordinarily I would do almost anything to oblige you, but I can't sell my honor; that is above price!"

"Mr. Jameson, I have brought a sum of money"—here she exhibited her purse—"and as you will set no price, I ask you to accept uncounted what I have brought."

"Miss King, my thanks are yours, but I must decline."

Czarina's shapely foot beat an impatient accompaniment upon the floor.

"You weary me!" she exclaimed.

"I am sorry."

"You look very much grieved," was the sarcastic comment. "Well, I shall leave the money here."

She tossed the purse upon the table.

"I shall send it back by a messenger at once."

Her eyes flashed.

"Would you dare?"

"I should dare and do," firmly, but calmly, responded Jameson.

"You dare too much; you do too much!" Czarina cried, angrily. "I have heard of your impertinent words to Mr. Perham. You dared announce yourself as my suitor!"

"Was that a crime?"

"Yes; for you knew me to be a man-hater."

"Your position does not compel me to be a woman-hater."

"Are you not compelled, as a gentleman, to respect my wishes?"

"In what way have I gone contrary to them? Thus far, in our brief acquaintance, I have done nothing but stop your horse and ride home with you."

"Heaven forbid that I should be forgetful of the fact that you saved my life; but, when you had been told that I was a man-hater, why did you tell my guardian you were my suitor?"

"Possibly I was hasty, but I gave utterance to the honest thoughts that were in my mind."

"Are they there now?"

"Frankly, yes."

Czarina's eyes flashed.

"It is well for you that you did me a service to-day. That will make me overlook your insult in a measure—but we wander from the subject. My purse lies on the table. Once more I ask you to accept the pay I offer."

Kit smiled slightly.

"I ought, I suppose, to have on a red shirt and carry a pick. At any rate, I am taken for a laborer, to be bought and paid. Miss King, you don't know my market value yet. It is just possible that I am not to be bought and sold for what cash you can put in that dainty purse; just possible, too, that when it comes to dollars and cents I have more than you."

"Pardon me; I have not said that you need the money."

"You inferred as much, I should say. Well, I may be a beggar or a millionaire, but I am not taking money just now."

With a firm tread he walked to the table, picked up the object of controversy and held it toward her.

"Here is your purse," he added; "I request that you return it to your pocket and never let me hear of it again!"

There was a new dignity in his manner, and Czarina felt her face flush painfully. Whatever she might think later, the idea was strong in her mind then that she had insulted Kit by offering the money. This confused her, and she might have yielded gracefully had she not also been painfully aware that to give way would be to admit complete defeat.

"You humiliate me!" she exclaimed.

"No, I preserve for you your self-respect."

She did not answer, and he held the purse nearer to her hand.

"Will you take your property?" he asked.

She received it mechanically.

"I wish we have never met!" she declared.

"Good may come out of evil. Come, Miss King, let us not fly at random any longer. Our little argument has made us better acquainted; why shouldn't we become friends?"

"I choose my own friends."

"I have a leaning that way, myself," was the response, "and that's why I picked you out. I fancied you from the start."

"And insulted me by declaring yourself my suitor!"

"Does respectful admiration go for nothing?"

"It does, with me."

"Yet, some torrents cannot be curbed. I don't see how I am going to admire you less,

and who can say what fate has in store for you and me? I was never superstitious, but, oddly enough, I have a feeling now that I may some day do you another favor. Possibly trouble will come to you. If it does, I shall be near!"

He looked into her eyes boldly. His manner was in no degree lacking in respect, but there was an air of determination about it that ill-accorded with her high spirit.

"I will not accept further favors from you under any condition!" she retorted.

"Fate gave you no chance to choose, to-day, when your horse was running away; it may be so next time."

"Nevertheless, I shall choose. I accept no more from you!"

"Perhaps you will need no aid, but if you do, will you not regard me as your friend?"

"Most decidedly, no!"

"That is certainly bad news."

"More than this, I will stay here no longer to be mocked at by you. I will say no more about the money, since you take such a lofty view of it; but from this hour we are strangers!"

As she spoke the last words Czarina wheeled and started out of the room. She saw the grave bow which Kit made, but she did not answer. She hurried from the hotel, breathing an inward prayer that no one would see her go, or know she had visited Kit.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BLACKSMITH'S QUESTION.

CHARON awaited his mistress, and Czarina quickly mounted. She felt almost certain that Saddle-Chief Kit was watching her from the window, but she would not deign to glance that way. She felt that he was beneath her notice, and for the time, at least, she gave no such notice.

Turning her face homeward, she galloped off.

When she reached the parsonage Harp Moy was outside the house. She flung the rein to him, sprung to the ground and entered the house. Having no warning that any one not a member of the household was present, she entered the sitting-room at once, to find herself in the presence of Mr. Perham, Esther Bastion, David and Pansy.

Czarina's eyes were quick. She sent one sweeping glance to the trio, and in that instant decided that she did not wish to know more of them. She was about to turn away when the minister's voice stopped her. He had nerved himself for the moment, and spoke with tolerable calmness.

"Czarina, these are guests of mine—Mrs. Bastion, her son, David, and her daughter Pansy."

"Dear heart!" quoth Mrs. Bastion, "how do you do?"

Czarina bowed coldly.

"Mrs. Bastion," pursued Perham, "is an old friend"—he hesitated a moment over the obnoxious word—"and she and her children will remain with us for a few days."

"I am sure Czarina and Pansy will be right good friends," added Pansy's mother.

The familiar use of her name grated upon Miss King's nerves, and one glance at the face of the uncouth Pansy was a fresh shock, but, whatever her failings, Czarina had always tried to treat her guardian's guests politely.

She bowed again, with more civility than she felt and then addressed Perham:

"I will see that preparations are duly made for supper, uncle. I shall meet our guests then."

Once more she inclined her head slightly, and then left the room.

"Graceful as a sprite!" affirmed the maternal Bastion.

"Stiff as a poker!" scoffed Pansy, viciously.

"Gammon!" David commented; "the gal is an angel; that's what she is!"

"The very image of what I was, at her age!" added Esther, effusively.

Perham made a warning gesture. Esther did not seem to heed it, but wandered off into a complimentary dissertation on the subject of female beauty in general and Czarina's charms in particular. Tyrington Perham listened, sick at heart. Esther was a magazine of mischief, and he would rather have had a rattlesnake in his house.

Every moment he expected her to throw her promise to the four winds and reveal the secret she had agreed to keep. When once this was done, farewell to happiness and harmony at the parsonage; farewell to Czarina's peace of mind; exit the happy life of old, and enter misfortunes of which he dreaded to think.

His one hope lay in the chance that Esther would value her position in the house too highly to throw it away by revealing the facts of the unhappy past.

Esther made herself at home. She announced her intention of doing so, prefacing it with the remark that it would be excusable in an old friend, and then settled down with an air of contentment which was admirable in its way, but ill-accorded with Perham's state of mind.

In due time supper was ready, and it was eaten with the full family at the table. In addition to those already introduced there was the housekeeper, Mrs. Granger, a meek old lady who,

though an employee, was considered by Perham as his full equal. She and Harp Moy were his only assistants.

The supper passed off without any serious break. The Bastions showed a lack of good breeding in all they did, but as no rash remarks were made, the host considered himself lucky and actually felt grateful to Esther and her children.

Afterward, David announced his intention of going out to see the town, and went accordingly, while his mother and sister returned to the sitting-room. Perham knew that Czarina would be busy for some time, and he seized the chance to retire to his study.

He wanted opportunity to think, and when once the friendly door had closed behind him, he proceeded to survey the situation.

He found nothing to reassure him; on the contrary, the more he looked the field over, the more worried he became.

It was no idle specter of the past that Esther had raised. That past had been a miserable one, and if its shadows were projected into the present, untold sorrow would result. For himself Perham had nothing to fear except as he was wounded through Czarina; but to the latter, the danger was beyond expression.

Once let Esther's lawless tongue move, and proud Czarina's life might be ruined. No fault of hers was at stake, but the weight of shame would nevertheless be upon her, and Perham trembled to think what might occur.

Half an hour passed in considering the matter, and then there was a knock at the door. Harp Moy appeared.

"Melican man down-stairs to see you—he Hall Pembroke," the servant announced.

"Bless me! is that so? Bid him come up at once, Moy."

Moy retreated, and there was but little delay before the visitor appeared.

Hall Pembroke was a man of about twenty-eight years. Seen casually, there was but little to distinguish him from other men. He was of medium height and very muscularly built, while his plain, substantial air would mark him as a practical man, who, in a grave way, would make the best of the affairs of life and be of good courage in all emergencies. His daily work, too, was practical, he being a blacksmith by occupation.

Since they met at Si Gotch, he and Perham had often been thrown in contact, and the latter had learned that there were some things in Hall Pembroke's nature not apparent on the surface—things which most persons did not see at all—and which were but vaguely understood by Perham himself.

There are some persons who lay their whole nature bare to the public eye; who are precisely what they seem, and nothing more. There is a second-class—and of this the mass of humanity is made—who let the world at large see them in a certain light, usually a matter-of-fact one, while for their closest friends they reserve a different nature. Again, there is a third class who may almost be said to live a dual existence. No reference is here made to the man who carries a fair face in public and a black heart in private.

This third class is composed of persons peculiarly constituted and, usually, extremely sensitive. A member of this class has his nature worked out at the beginning, but when he arrives at years of discretion, he sees that his ideas would not be popular with the world at large. The world has its standard, and it differs materially from his. He sees that to present his real nature would be to make himself unpopular; perhaps to expose himself to ridicule; while if he glides into the current of the commonplace—the world's favorite—he may go quietly along.

His intelligence causes him to see that this is best, and he accepts the best way. His real self is put aside, but, while the world sees him as a man of the orthodox style, there exists within him another, truer self, of which casual acquaintances never get a glimpse.

Perham believed this to be the case with Hall Pembroke. They had been so intimate that he had been allowed privileges not vouchsafed the "common herd," and he felt sure Pembroke was not the common-place individual he appeared; though, just how he was constructed, the minister did not know.

Such was the man who entered Perham's study, and as no abstruse consideration was then in the latter's mind, Pembroke brought light with him. He was not a handsome man—for which fact he had cause to be grateful—but his plain, strong face was full of intelligence, and Perham greeted him cordially.

"You're very welcome, Mr. Pembroke!" the host declared.

"Thank you, sir; I thought it was about time for one of my periodical visits," modestly answered the visitor.

"Right, quite right; and I only wish you came more frequently."

Pembroke looked earnestly at the speaker.

"Do you, really?" he asked.

"I really do."

"That is pleasant."

"I should be glad to see you drop in often."

"You are very kind, sir."

"There isn't such a great deal of congenial company here. The miners are good friends of mine, but they are all bound up in gold-hunting."

"They can hardly be blamed."

"Certainly not; I am not one to cry out against wealth. Well applied, it is a desirable possession."

"You judge men as you see them."

"I try to, Mr. Pembroke."

"And you have no esteem for an evil man."

"No; but he has my compassion."

"Suppose that Si Gotch was more lawless than it is—how would you regard the evil-doers?"

"The wages of sin is death!"

Perham quoted the words gravely and without any touch of sanctimoniousness, but, looking at his visitor, he was surprised to see the latter shiver.

"Are you cold?" the minister added.

"Not bodily."

"How then?" Perham asked, with some surprise.

Pembroke changed his position slightly, like one who collects his energies for a shock, and his companion was impressed by the fact that there was an odd expression on his face.

"Did you never hear of any one being cold mentally?" Pembroke asked.

"Bless me! no—I never did."

"I am that way."

"I'm not sure I understand," observed Perham, who, to tell the truth, was quite sure he did not understand.

"I am cold mentally; an icy weight seems to be upon my brain," somberly explained the visitor.

"Why, you are ill!"

"Not bodily."

"Mentally, then."

"You are right; I am very ill, mentally."

"You must see a doctor."

"He could do me no good. If I am capable of improvement, it rests with you."

"But it is out of my line."

"Wrong, Mr. Perham; it is just in your line."

"Really, sir, we do not seem to comprehend each other."

"My meaning can be made plain. I do not need a physician of the body, but of the mind. I am sorely ill, and I want your help. Being afflicted, I want you to prescribe for me."

"What can I do?"

"I want you to keep me from doing murder!"

CHAPTER VII.

A STRANGE INHERITANCE.

THE last startling words fell in slow, heavy tones from Pembroke's lips, but they made Perham start as though he had received a blow. He recoiled and sat looking at his visitor in a terrified manner.

"What?" he cried.

"I want you to keep me from doing murder!" Pembroke steadily repeated.

"Powers of mercy! what do you mean?"

"Precisely what I say. I presume you will not fully comprehend—the ways of sin are strange to the good—but I am a man tempted beyond my strength; tempted to do murder!"

"Impossible!"

"It is true."

"Surely, you do not refer to human life?"

"But I do."

"Who has wronged you past the bounds of endurance?"

"No one."

"Then why do you speak so wildly?"

"Because I am a man tempted."

Pembroke's stolid manner continued, but the minister not only believed him to be in earnest, but thought he could discern signs of acute mental suffering.

"Does your mania point to any one person?"

"One, and one only."

"Who is he?"

"Judah Mardwin."

Perham knew the man, but though he did not like him, that fact did not lessen the horror which had fallen upon him. With the naming of a particular person the danger grew more perceptible and realistic, and the gentle mind of the preacher of the Gospel staggered under the load put upon it.

"How has Mardwin injured you?" he asked.

"I told you a moment ago that no one had injured me 'past the bounds of endurance,' as you expressed it. Such should be the fact, yet it is not. Mardwin has injured me, and I do not feel able to bear it—nay, I cannot bear it!"

The speaker's calmness suddenly vanished. His face was distorted by a spasm, and his fingers were locked and unlocked with nervous haste. A light shone in his eyes which alarmed Perham.

"What has he done?" the minister faltered.

"You know Jessie Hollis?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you have seen that I seek her company when I can?"

"I have noticed it."

"So does Judah Mardwin!"

Pembroke breathed so hard that his compan-

ion could hear his respirations, and his hands shook as though with the palsy.

"He is your rival, then?" asked Perham.

"Yes."

"Surely, you would do him no harm for that—and, besides, Jessie Hollis would never look at him; I doubt if she could regard him as a friend. She is one of the most devoted members of my church, and Mardwin is a scoffer at religion, a man given to dissipation and to lawless acts."

"I am sure Jessie does not like him, nor even respect him."

"Then why are you so fearful of his rivalry?"

"I am not."

"Then, in the name of mercy, why do you feel so bitter against him?"

"There are two reasons, one of which springs from the other. The second shall be mentioned first. Mardwin, if not a successful rival, is aggravating beyond conception. From the beginning of our acquaintance I have avoided him—why, you shall learn later. He was not long in seeing that I feared him—'feared' is the proper word—and when he also learned that I was his rival, he began to aggravate me."

"How?"

"By sneers and sarcasms; by words spoken and things implied; by jeers at my appearance, my avoidance of him and my peculiarities."

"Could you not match him in this way?" asked Perham, with sudden spirit, for he had never before hinted at retaliation.

"I dared not, lest I do him harm, for it had long before been revealed to me that I was some day to slay him."

"Revealed? How?"

"By an evil intuition—an unseen demon—an internal consciousness—call it what you will."

"Pembroke," said the minister, seriously, "I believe you are coming down with fever, and that it is in your head!"

"I wish it was no worse, but it is a thousand times worse. Mr. Perham, you have known me for a year, and I think you will admit that I am a man desirous of doing his duty in all ways."

"Most cordially I corroborate you."

"Imagine, then, how I have felt going about and, day by day, meeting the man I felt myself doomed to kill!"

Again Hall Pembroke's face was convulsed with emotion, and he arose and began to pace the room in an agitated manner.

"This is the creation of a diseased mind!" declared Perham, with all the firmness he could assume.

Pembroke suddenly returned to his seat.

"Pay attention to me and you shall be convinced," he returned. "I have come prepared to tell you a strange story, and the sooner it is over, the better. It reaches well back; it begins with my grandfather. He was reared in a village of the East. His mother was his only known relative. As he grew old enough to be curious he asked her about his father, but, beyond the fact that he had died young, the boy gained no information. He grew up ignorant of his ancestry in all things, and this was the state of affairs when his mother died."

"Left alone in the world, the boy, then seventeen years of age, soon learned more about his family. His father had been of English birth, and had lived in the old country until, shortly after his marriage, he had met a man whom, he felt, he must slay. He had fled from temptation, and had come to America, but at the end of a year the man had appeared in this country. How it came about the informant did not know, but the stranger and my great-grandfather quarreled and fought, and the former was slain. My great-grandfather was pursued, and, in trying to escape, he was drowned in a river."

"Such was the story my grandfather heard, but it affected him only as a queer fact."

"Years passed; he grew to manhood; he married and settled down. Two years later he met a man he had never before seen, and the conviction was at once forced upon his mind that he was destined to kill him. In vain he struggled against the idea; it grew upon him, do what he might."

"After some months it came to pass that he and the man quarreled over a lot of land which was the boundary of their respective farms. They came to blows and the other man was killed. My grandfather was arrested, but, it being shown that he was not the aggressor, was acquitted; but the deed weighed upon his mind and, although he lived to advanced years, it embittered his whole existence."

"His only son, my father, was reared in perfect ignorance of the family weakness, but he could not escape his fate. He married an estimable woman, and I was born. In due time his temptation came. A stranger settled in town, and my mother met him at a charitable gathering. She was pleased with the man, and invited him to the house."

"My father had been a kind husband, and her wishes were his law. He had not seen Barthias Dunn, but for my mother's sake he was prepared to meet him as a friend. They met, and my father at once had the conviction that he was fated to kill Dunn."

"Not being aware of the hereditary evil, he

tried to laugh down the impulse as something absurd. It did seem so to him, and as Barthias Dunn was pleasant and sociable, it also seemed the extreme of wickedness.

"My father struggled in vain. The power within him—call it what you will—was all the while urging him on. It told him he was born to kill the man, and must do it. The struggle wore upon my father, and he grew morose and ill. He tried to avoid Dunn, but the man sought his society.

"Meanwhile, Dunn continued his work, which was to collect money for some distant charitable object—it matters not just what. He was very successful, and, in the course of time, had a considerable sum collected.

"One night my father had been out late, and on his way home he saw a light in one part of the church. He knew that there were valuables there, and he used a key he had and entered a side door. He found a man rummaging over the church property.

"My father accosted him, but was at once attacked by the unknown. A struggle followed, and, finding his own life menaced, my father put forth every effort. It ended in the death of the masked man.

"When all was over, my father removed the mask.

"The other man was Barthias Dunn!

"My father was wholly unnerved at finding his presentiment realized. He had felt that he must kill the man, and Dunn lay dead at his feet.

"For a while he was as weak as a child, but his self-possession finally returned, and he went for help. When the truth was known, all men praised him; it was found that Dunn was a swindler; that he had never gathered the money for charitable use, but, having secured it, had been on the point of stealing the whole, and running away when my father interrupted him.

"Such being the case, no one thought less of my father than before, and he was never even arrested, but the fact remains that he was the third of my line known to have an impulse to kill, and who yielded to the impulse. I am the fourth to have the impulse—what will be the result?"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MAN AND THE TEMPTATION.

PEMBROKE had told his strange story without the least animation or lightness. From the star this manner had been gloomy and heavy, and Tyrington Perham could not but be influenced by it. He, however, possessed a nature which looked to high things. He was as little inclined to superstition as Pembroke had avowed himself to be, and he was by no means ready to accept a dark view of the case.

The speaker ceased and looked fixedly at his companion.

"A singular series of coincidences," observed the minister.

"Singular and fatal!" the blacksmith returned.

"I hope you are not influenced by them."

"I am."

"Bless me! that is not right."

"What can you expect? I have shown you that three generations of my family have been similarly affected; that each, at first sight of a certain man, had a conviction that he was destined to slay him, and in each case the presentiment was verified; and I suspect that the decree of fate reached further back than my great-grandfather."

"My dear Pembroke, don't talk about a decree of fate. Call it coincidences, and let it go at that."

"That will not do; I tell you it is a fatality which follows my family."

"Why should such a thing be?"

"I cannot tell you; I can only point to the past as my proof, and remind you that I am on the same road my ancestors trod before me."

"Simply because you dislike Judah Mardwin?"

"Because when I first saw him I had a conviction that I should some day kill him."

"Monstrous!" Perham ejaculated, involuntarily.

"You are right; but, what can I do? I have struggled against the impulse; I have tried to overcome my faith in the accursed heritage of crime, and to refrain at all hazards from doing Mardwin harm. Yes, I have even contemplated leaving Si Gotch, but I am satisfied that my fate would follow me. Go where I might, Mardwin would reappear to me. No, the battle must be fought out here."

"The battle! Do you call it that when you passively admit that it will end by your killing Mardwin?"

Tyrington Perham had never appeared to better advantage than then. To tell the truth he was more at home with the affairs of the future world than those of the present, and, even as the Divine laws of justice and forgiveness were more thoroughly grasped by his mind than the petty affairs of every-day life, so he was more at home on this question than any he had had presented to him for a long time.

True, he did not understand the question proper in the least—unless he decided that Pembroke was mentally deranged—but he did know

that the shedding of human blood was against the laws of the Gospel he preached.

To his last reproof Pembroke replied:

"I have not been passive, Mr. Perham; you don't know how hard I have struggled."

"Have you shunned Mardwin?"

"Yes. Sedulously avoided meeting him."

"I saw you together only yesterday."

"He seeks my company persistently."

"Then he has no ill will toward you?"

"You are wrong; he has the bitterest ill will.

He hates me because Jessie Hollis will not transfer her affections to him; and I believe he regards my shrinking from his company—which he cannot help seeing—as evidence that I hold him in personal fear. Indeed, he cannot well hold other opinion. He has openly insulted me and Jessie; he taunts me in every way; he says every vicious thing that his perverted mind can invent to aggravate and anger me!"

The speaker's somber melancholy disappeared. He straightened his muscular figure; his face grew hard and stern; and the flashing of his eyes betrayed how far Judah Mardwin had been successful in his attempt to "aggravate and anger" him.

"There! there!" Perham exclaimed; "don't think of it."

"How else can I meet the danger?"

"You must avoid, not meet it."

"The danger and Mardwin are one; I have tried in vain to avoid him."

"Something must be done!"

"That is why I have come to you. I have held my secret as long as I can, but Mardwin's persecutions are too much for me. Strive as I will, he is bound to overcome my resistance if something is not done. He seeks me out wherever I go, and taunts me as no man was ever taunted before; nothing is too evil for him to say. Do you wonder that my resolution wavers when I look into his sneering face and hear his jeers?"

Pembroke brought his hand down fiercely upon his knee.

"Let the man beware!" he cried; "he will yet carry this too far. If once I lay my hands upon him he will repent—"

The flashing eyes were raised until they met the meek orbs of the minister. The sight produced an immediate revulsion of feeling. The tense muscles relaxed; the fire was succeeded by the old gloom of expression.

"You see to what a pitch I am driven," he added hoarsely.

"Unhappy man!" Perham murmured.

"I am a miserable wretch!" Pembroke agreed.

"You must leave Si Gotch."

"Why?"

"To avoid Mardwin."

"It would be useless; he would follow me."

"You can hide."

"He would find me; it is his fate and mine."

"Do you still cling to that superstition?"

"I know I am doomed to be his slayer."

A stern expression appeared on Perham's face.

"You speak impiously," he declared. "However the Ruler of earth may preordain events, no man is made to slay another. As a minister of the Gospel I affirm that as my deliberate opinion. Man holds his destiny, in many ways, in his own hands; he can slay or save, but he does it as a free agent. No beneficent Power is party to what is evil. You are no more fated to slay Judah Mardwin than I am to slay you, and a heroic struggle will free you from your temptation."

"You don't know how I have struggled," answered Pembroke, helplessly. "If my own efforts would avail anything you would never have heard of my temptation."

"Why have you told me now?"

"I hoped you could help me."

"How?"

"That I don't know."

"You have rejected my advice to leave Si Gotch."

"Because it would be useless."

"Have you no other plan?"

"None."

"I suppose I could see Mardwin?"

"What could you say to him?"

"At least, I could ask him to cease his persecution."

"It would merely be a confession of my weakness, and would stimulate him to fresh indignities."

"Really, then, I see but little chance for me to help you. Have you told Jessie this?"

"Heaven forbid! No; and I would not have her know it for anything. What would she say if she knew I had such an impulse upon me!"

"Were you to marry at once, would it not drive Mardwin off?"

"I do not think it would, and, besides, she objects to marrying while her mother lives. All her care is needed by the feeble old lady."

"I know, and nobly does Jessie do her duty."

Perham spoke absently, and at once fell into deep thought. Pembroke watched him anxiously. He had come with the faint hope that the minister might be able to offer some suggestion to help him, but the hope had not been

realized thus far. The probability that no relief would be afforded was strong in the visitor's mind, and the dull, hopeless expression remained on his face.

It was some time before the minister spoke again, but he finally aroused and renewed the subject. He said nothing new, but did make a strong argument. He tried to show Pembroke how foolish it was to believe that such a dark inheritance had come down through past generations to him, and how absurd it was to suppose that he was fated to kill Judah Mardwin.

He dwelt eloquently upon the crime of shedding human blood, and the duty of crushing out all thoughts of it, and wound up with a grand burst such as he usually used in the pulpit.

Hall Pembroke listened patiently, but the hopeless look did not leave his face. Common-place logic was not suited to his case, and Perham had said no more than he had, himself, previously considered.

When the speaker was done Hall knew that his visit had been a failure; he was still left to face the question of how he was to avoid doing harm to Mardwin.

He arose to go.

"I trust you are in a better frame of mind, my dear friend," Perham observed.

"I am grateful for your kindness, sir."

"And Judah Mardwin?"

"He and I are in the hands of fate!" replied Pembroke, somberly; and then he put on his hat and walked to the door.

"Promise me you will do him no harm."

"I shall certainly do my best to resist temptation."

With these words Pembroke opened the door and stepped out. The night was dark, only two or three stars showing in the sky, and Perham was impressed with the fact that it was a gloomy home-going for a man in such a frame of mind.

"Shall I walk with you?" he asked.

"Thank you, but you need not; I had just as soon go alone."

"Shall you go home at once?"

"Yes."

"Do so. Good-night!"

"Good-night."

Pembroke took a few steps in the darkness and then hesitated and turned partially around. The light from the house fell upon his face and revealed an expression of painful anxiety; then he repeated his parting words and walked away.

The minister watched until the darkness hid him from view, and then sighed audibly.

"Poor fellow! it is a distressing case! I suppose the majority of men would at once decide that he was out of his mind, but I feel sure such is not the case. He is as sane as I am—yet what a terrible, what a strange idea rules his mind. I never heard of anything like it. He fully realizes what a sacred thing human life is, and what a crime it is to shed human blood, yet he seems to be perfectly helpless in this, the hour of his affliction. I wish I could help him!"

The expression was perfectly sincere, but Perham felt that the cure was beyond his reach.

As he had said, the case was strange. Mania in persons mentally diseased was not anything to wonder at, but nothing like this had ever come to his notice.

He was deeply moved, and had dark forebodings as to Hall Pembroke's future.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CENTAUR IS ORDERED TO LEAVE.

AFTER eating his supper Kit Jameson retired to his private room and wrote a letter. He had no other business on hand, and two hours passed before he thought of leaving. Then as he was in a strange town, he concluded that he would visit the common room of the hotel and see what kind of a crowd they could get together.

Entering, he thought at first sight that he should see nothing out of the ordinary run. A bar was at one side, and in front of it, and at the tables, was a crowd of men who were making the air blue with tobacco-smoke and alive with noisy talk.

It was not a particularly hard-looking crowd, and Kit expected to find no more than ordinary attention given him, but he had barely entered the room when there was a sudden cessation of conversation and nearly every gaze became fixed upon him.

Such marked attention did not please the rover, but, readily inferring that news of his service to Czarina King had gone abroad, he walked calmly to the center of the room.

At once, however, a stout, red-faced man started to meet him, holding out a big, brown hand.

"Sir," exclaimed this man, "I am proud to meet ye. I'm Con Byrd, an' I'm pooty much all hyar. I take pleasure in welcomin' you ter Si Gotch. Won't you straddle up ter the bar an' wash the dust out o' yer throat?"

All this was spoken in a loud, hearty voice, but it was followed by a broad wink, and the man lowered his voice to a whisper, and added:

"Do it, stranger—do it. There's a clique ag'in' ye hyar, an' ugly feelin's at work. Stick ter me, fur I'm yer friend."

This address surprised Kit considerably, for he had no reason to suppose that he would meet enemies there, but he had seen danger in his day, and knew he was liable to see it again.

He had always been amply able to take care of himself, but the appearance of Con Byrd rather pleased him, and he promptly decided to go with the current for a while.

"I don't care if I do take something mild, friend. I don't go very heavy on liquid fire, but, as you say, a thimbleful of it is good to wash out the dust."

"You kin bet high on *that*! I don't know what I'd done without it, fur my throat is amazin'ly given ter gatherin' dust. Mine's whisky, barkeep. You never seen sech a throat as mine, stranger. Ef thar is a whirlwind over in Arizona, I ketch the dust hyar in Colorado. Havin' ketched it, it must be washed out; an', by p'ison, it gits washed out!"

This assertion was tempered with such a rollicking air of good-humor that even a temperance orator would have found himself moved to forgive the jolly imbibor, but Con Byrd poured down the whisky with a relish less pleasant to behold.

"They hev pooty fair speerits hyar at Si Gotch," he added, "but they don't keep 'em long—not when I'm around. I trace a ree-markable coincidence in the case, too. When the whisky bar'l leaks, my pocket leaks, too. Odd, ain't it?"

"I dare say the second leak offsets the first, though I can't prophesy as much for the effect of the first on the second."

"Not bad, stranger—not bad. Logic, that is, an' fack, too. My pocket is the wu'st busted article o' commerce in Si Gotch. It needs protection, by rights, but it gits free trade. Con Byrd, when he's flush, would be a rarity fit ter put on exhibition in a show. No, thank ye; I won't drink ag'in. Rev a cheer, stranger, an' let's smoke the pipe o' peace and harmony."

Mr. Byrd rattled off these words in the most jolly, happy-go-lucky way imaginable, but, while he spoke, he was doing more. His sharp, deep-set gray eyes were hardly ever at rest, and he darted frequent glances at the crowd beyond.

Kit did not fail to observe this, and as his own gaze wandered in the same direction, he could not be oblivious to the fact that the circle of faces was by no means friendly.

In sharp contrast to Con's manner, a scowl sat upon many a face there, and the dashing rover was the focus of glances which bore an appearance decidedly hostile.

Kit knew of no good reason why this should be so, but he was by no means alarmed. Let the cause be what it might, he expected to take care of himself.

He and Con sat down at one of the tables, but they had no sooner done so than a man walked up and laid his hand on the latter's shoulder.

"It won't work, Byrd!" the man announced.

"Hallo! are you there, Dike Harrington?" coolly replied Byrd.

"I'm here."

"Will you take a cheer?"

"I don't sit in such company!"

The speaker's voice was harsh, and he leveled his finger at Saddle-Chief Kit.

"Want ter stand up an' rest?" quickly returned Con. "I like settin' better."

"You can't drive me from the point," declared Harrington, stubbornly.

"Lord love ye! men should never have p'int when they meet in social good-humor. Put all biz away, an' be pert an' cheerful, is my motto. Who's in fur a drink at my expense?"

"Nobody!" asserted Harrington. "Don't let your tongue run so fast, Con; I'm bound to have speech with Mister Kit Jameson, and he can't dodge it."

"When you see me trying to dodge, just let me know!" retorted Kit. "Stranger, I don't know you, but if you have aught to say to me, don't let it spoil with age. That's my advice."

"Your name is Kit Jameson?"

"Beyond doubt."

"Commonly called Saddle-Chief Kit?"

"Right, again."

"You are the man I want to see."

"Then I hope you are satisfied."

"Satisfied! Not by any means; we shall not be satisfied until you are driven out of Si Gotch!" declared Harrington, striking his clinched hand upon the table.

"Who is 'we'?"

"The people of Si Gotch."

"Do you speak for them?"

"Yes."

"Then, possibly, you will tell me *why* my presence in town is so obnoxious."

"We've heard of you before."

"What have you heard?"

"We know you by reputation well. You are a dare-devil, who don't care a fig for the law. All you do care for is a horse. Men say you are a marvel in that line, and can ride like a Centaur. As to that we don't care; nothing would please us more than to see you point your horse's head away from Si Gotch and *ride*!"

"If I may be allowed to make a remark," mildly observed Jameson, "I will say that it takes you a long while to come to the point. I

am still at a loss to know what is agitating your gentle breast."

"Gents," interposed Kit's new friend, "I move that we all take a drink an' drop this discussion."

"You dry up, Con Byrd!" retorted Harrington.

"Do ye know any way ter make me, Dike What's-ye-name? I'm a rusty old rooster when you put nettles on my comb, an' the way I kin grow spurs, an' use 'em, is marvelous. Don't threaten me, hoss!"

Con waved a huge fist in the air dramatically, and the object of his anger evinced a desire to avoid trouble with him.

"The subject of our conversation is this stranger," he observed, sullenly.

"Stick to your text," Kit advised, "and let me hear what is disturbing your mental balance."

"The long and short of it is, the people of Si Gotch don't think you are a desirable citizen. Your reputation as a dare-devil is wide-spread, and, that isn't all. There have been queer proceedings wherever you have gone, such as stage-robberies, bank-breakings, burglaries and the like. My good friend, John P. Hicksit, a detective of Denver, was once looking for you when a stage had been held up. Wherever you have been the authorities are anxious to see you, but I notice you don't call the second time. It may be you think there would be more hemp than lead waiting you. Now, Si Gotch is a peaceful, law-abiding town, and tough characters are not allowed here."

Kit had been watching the speaker closely while he was presenting his case.

"You make a pretty strong showing," he then said, with manifest sarcasm. "Pray, who is my accuser?"

"The people of Si Gotch."

"Somebody must have worked the claim."

"'Twas Dike Harrington," volunteered Byrd.

Harrington gave him a hostile glance, but did not venture any comment.

"So you lead the gang, eh?" continued Kit.

"I am spokesman."

"I have a word to say to the other men."

"What one of you knows anything against me?"

There was no answer.

"Did any of you ever see me before?"

Still there was no reply.

"What one of you, except Harrington, can testify to the charges against me?"

"It is generally known—"

"Hold up, Mr. Harrington! I am not addressing you, and I won't have your oar in. I'm not in the habit of having my hat jammed down over my eyes, I can tell you. Now, who speaks against me?"

"Nobody but Harrington," put in Con Byrd.

"I thought that was the size of it. I have come peacefully into Si Gotch and found the people ready to receive me in a 'white' way—all but one man! Now, then, Mr. Dike Harrington, in what way have I trod on your corns?"

The rover turned sharply upon his accuser as he asked the question, and Harrington involuntarily moved back a pace. Then he forced an uneasy laugh.

"I don't imagine a man of your size is going to tread on me," he returned.

"Nonsense! Don't dodge the point. You are moved in this matter by personal spite, and I want to know what you've got against me."

"I'm against having any outlaw in this camp."

"Perfectly fit and proper. But, Mr. Harrington, did it ever occur to you that you may get into a muss by falsely accusing a man better than yourself? I call upon the men of Si Gotch to give me fair play. I ask no more."

"You shall have it!" exclaimed a voice, and others echoed the pledge.

"That's square talk. Now, I want your attention while I point out the weakness of the case Harrington has tried to make against me. He has made no direct accusation. He has talked about stage robberies and the like, but not one instance has he given. Does he say that, on a specified date, I, Saddle-Chief Kit, held up a stage at a given point? Not much; he did not dare; he can't think of a case to fit. He has dealt in generalities, and his generalities have been lies. That, gentlemen, is the case in small compass. I've robbed no stage, but Harrington has lied!"

CHAPTER X.

SOMEBODY BACKS DOWN.

SADDLE-CHIEF KIT was proving himself a man of nerve. While every other man was upon his feet, and showing more or less excitement, he kept his seat and put the screws down on Harrington with a cool, merciless hand.

When he used the last words he was well aware that he was treading on delicate ground, but he went ahead calmly, not in the least moved by anger, and prepared to make good all he said.

He had more friends in the crowd than when he began, and he knew it. He was reading the faces before him as though they were cards to be played in the game.

Dike Harrington turned pale when the last accusation was hurled at him.

"Silence!" he shouted. "Let me hear any more of that talk and it will be the worse for you!"

Kit laughed lightly.

"What'll you do, Harry?" he asked, mockingly.

"I allow no man to call me a liar!"

"What'll you do about it?"

"Boys!" cried the spokesman, turning to the crowd, "haven't we given this fellow rope enough? I move that we run him out of town at once!"

There was a responsive chorus from some of the men who were very plainly ready to follow their leader in all things, but Kit showed no disturbance.

"I object to being run out of town, and I won't be run out!" he boldly asserted.

"That's the talk!" cried Con Byrd. "I'm with ye, body an' boots. Gents, nobody ever said yet that Si Gotch was ag'in' fair play. How is it now?"

There was a hearty response from such of the men as had been favorably impressed by Kit's manner, and Harrington looked more angry than ever as he saw that he had a divided house.

"Accept my thanks," Kit quickly said; "and now, gentlemen, I don't ask you to eat husks. I'll give you more substantial reasons for believing in me. Right at the start I want to say I am no road-agent or bank-robber; my record is open to the world, and I defy any man to find a loose screw."

"We b'lieve you," asserted Byrd.

"More than this, Mr. Harrington has referred to a Denver detective and claimed him as his friend—John P. Hicksit, is the name. Now, I am acquainted with Hicksit, myself, and I have a proposition to make to you. Ten miles away, at Cobble Camp, there is one end of a telegraph line. I propose that you folks give me the run of Si Gotch until word can be sent to John P. Hicksit. Telegraph him and ask whether Kit Jameson is all right or not. I'll abide by his verdict."

Con Byrd leaped up into a chair and waved his arms wildly.

"Hear ye! hear ye!" he cried. "That's a fair offer for all parties. Saddle-Chief Kit is full-proof an' 'bout twenty carat fine. Fair play is a jewel, an' Si Gotch don't git left in a deal with justice. Who favors Kit Jameson's idee?"

There was a hearty response, and many hands went up, but Harrington kept his place doggedly.

"I object!" he persisted.

"Oh! durn your butes, be you thar still?" asked Con, in disgust.

"I'm here to defend Si Gotch."

"Lord pity Si Gotch when she needs sech a defender!"

"I'll see you later, Con Byrd!"

"Yon kin see me now!" vociferated the big borderman. "Ef your fingers tingle ter lay holt o' my size, do, fur the Lord's sake, lay a-holt!"

"One thing at a time," was the reply. "I want to address the honest people of this town; I want to ask them if they are going to give up their avowed purpose and let yonder man stay here to do further damage."

He pointed to Kit as he spoke.

There was a murmur from his followers, but it was by no means strong.

Kit had been analyzing the crowd carefully and he now arose and faced his friends and foes with a calm, confident face.

"Let's get the sentiment of the house," he suggested; "let's have a vote. All those who want me run out as a noxious varmint, up hands!"

Harrington and his men made haste to vote.

"Thirteen!" Kit announced. "That's an unlucky number. Contrary-minded, now!"

The moderate citizens had their turn.

"Sixteen!" calmly added Kit. "Gentlemen, I thank you for your kindness, and I shall stay in Si Gotch. We will get John P. Hicksit's evidence as soon as possible, and, my word for it, you will not be disappointed. He will tell you I am all right."

The speaker turned to Harrington, who was standing with an expression of scowling irresolution on his face.

"Cap," he coolly added, "it has narrowed down to a matter between you and me. Once more I ask you, in what way have I trod on your corns?"

"You talk in riddles."

"Not at all; you have a personal spite against me. What is it? I confess I don't know, but I'm willing to learn. State the case, and I reckon we can settle it in some way. If I've done you wrong, I shall be willing to own right up; but if I have *not*, and you really want a racket, why, I reckon I can accommodate you."

The nonchalant rover sat down on one corner of the table, thrust his hands into his pockets, and puffed his cigar with an air of deep contentment.

"I'm so willing," he added, "that I'll take the chances of getting licked."

Harrington's face was very pale, from some

cause, and his eyes flashed bitter enmity upon the cool stranger, but he did not seem inclined to accept the challenge.

"I have no more to do with you," he growled. "I have tried to do my duty by Si Gotch, but my efforts have not been appreciated. My advice has been disregarded, and now I have got enough. Those here who think they are wiser than I am, can manage the case now."

With these words he made for the door. Kit seemed half-inclined to stop him, but thought better of it and let him go. He gave one parting shot, however.

"I dare say we shall meet again. I'll find out some way what your grudge is, and then see you about it."

Con Byrd laid his hand on Kit's shoulder. "It's cause you saved Czarina King's life!" he announced in a whisper.

Kit turned his gaze upon his ally, looked puzzled for a moment, and then whistled softly.

"Friend Byrd, can I see you in my room half an hour later?" he asked.

"With alacrity, pardner."

Harrington had left the hotel, and half of his voters had followed. Kit felt that he owed a debt of gratitude to those who had stood by him, and he took a way of meeting it which, he felt sure, would prove acceptable to them. He asked them to step up to the bar and sample the alleged good things there.

The plan was a success, in a degree; for though the remainder of Harrington's men went out, those who had voted for Kit were glad to taste his hospitality, and when Con suggested that they drink the health of their new friend, the liquor went down with a will.

Kit devoted several minutes' time to cementing the alliance, and then gave Con a nod and left the room. The two were soon seated in the former's chamber.

"Partner," the rover bluffedly said, "I want to thank you heartily for the way you pulled sticks in my favor. You're a trump card!"

"Thank ye, sir; thank ye hearty," Con returned. "I allow I ain't a border ruffian myself, and when I seen a mean game up on a man whose figger-head pleased me, why I jest put up my pile in his favor."

"I owe you one, which I hope to repay. Now, give me another pointer. What's eating Harrington?"

"Jealous!"

"Of me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Cause you helped Czarina."

"Is she Harrington's best girl?"

"Not by a blamed sight! She's a man-hater, an' she wouldn't scrub the mud off her old shoes on him, anyhow. All samee, Dike is gone on her—dead gone."

"Humph! if that is all, isn't he an atom cheeky to kick up a row just because somebody else has aided her when she was in peril?"

"Don't expect Dike ter perceed on business principles, fur he won't do it. The long an' short on't is, he wants the gal an' is bound ter have her. When you showed up he scented danger. You're a better looker than he is, an' you had done her a favor. He seen danger ahead, an' he set out ter head it off—an' head you, too—by bouncin' you from town."

"Can you prove all this?"

"No; nor part of it. Ef I could I'd done it afore. I can't prove nothin', but I ain't blind."

"Well, let us assume that this is correct. Harrington failed in his little scheme. What will he do next?"

"I can't say, but one thing you kin mark down—he stands tolerable well in Si Gotch, but a meaner man don't abide hyarabout. My advice is, look sharp or he will make you sorry."

"As to that, I don't aspire to have trouble with any one, but I shall be at home whenever he calls."

"He won't call. He'll aim ter take ye on-awares. 'Twouldn't s'prise me ef he give ye a shot from some ambush."

"Ah-h! So that is his style! Well, I will bear all this in mind. As short time as I have been in Si Gotch I have some deadly enemies, and your word is not needed to assure me they are men who would not scruple to take my life. I shall govern myself accordingly, and while they are getting a feast I may be able to work in a bite and chew it well. When the gang comes I shall be ready!"

CHAPTER XI.

RIVAL LOVERS MEET.

THE following morning Hall Pembroke made his way to one of the smallest houses in Si Gotch, carrying in his hand a bouquet of wild flowers. He rapped at the door, which was opened by a young lady.

The world is full of young ladies, and they are of all conceivable kinds. The young lady of the cottage represented a kind for which the world ought to be grateful, for it is thereby made better and brighter. She was not beautiful in the orthodox sense of the term, but was a little maiden with a trim form and a plain, commonplace face. Plain the latter might be, taken feature by feature, but over

all sat a charm which the proudest beauty might well covet.

It was a bright, cheerful face; and how much that means when fully considered! That brightness, that cheerfulness, changed everything and impressed the beholder as few other things could. No one could summon courage to be a critic in the light of that charm. Criticism would fall back as from an impregnable fortress willingly conceding that though she was not a beauty, she was marvelously pretty.

Such was Jessie Hollis, and such the girl who held Hall Pembroke's heart in her keeping.

The bright face grew brighter as she saw who the applicant was, and her small, plump hand was extended to meet his own; and then she drew him into the house and closed the door.

"I didn't think for a moment who it was," she confessed, "though I ought to have known you would not miss a morning."

"Should I, too, have been missed?" he asked. "Indeed, you would; and now admit that you take pleasure in making me say it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" he returned, his own grave face lighting up wonderfully. "Why shouldn't I, when such words from you are happiness to me?"

"Are they really so?" asked Jessie, with her brightest look.

"All that and more. I've told you before how my whole life is bound up in you."

"Poor, insignificant me! I should think poorly of your judgment did I not know how wise you are."

Her hand rested in his, and he was supremely happy. Such conversations were common between them. They were very much like Jessie, and Hall Pembroke felt a sensation as though his soul was expanding. It was his misfortune to be constituted as her opposite. Naturally grave and gloomy, and haunted by the awful fear that had been upon him since he had met Judah Mardwin, such light conversation was to him like a fountain of sparkling water to the chase-wearied deer, and her smile like a ray of sunshine falling over all.

A while longer was this conversation continued, and then Hall came back to practical life.

"I have not asked after your mother, Jessie."

"She is not yet awake, but she rested well."

"I have brought some more flowers."

"I see; and she will be very grateful. She spoke particularly, yesterday, of your kindness."

Again Pembroke's face lighted up.

"Did she?"

"Yes."

"I am glad she thinks well of me."

"How can she help it? I cannot!"

"Don't try!" advised Hall, smiling.

He looked carefully about the room; a favorite amusement of his. It seemed to him that the room had a voice of its own. It had been many a weary day since he had had a home, and, of late years, he had oftener slept on a bed of pine boughs than one of a more pretentious kind.

The Hollis cottage was like a peaceful harbor at the end of a rough voyage. There, all was in order, all peaceful, all cozy and all harmonious; and if the place had a voice of its own, it was one originated by Jessie. She was the mistress of this paradise; she was the bright agent that kept it in order, and it was not strange that Pembroke's nature was softened when there, and his mind moved until a child-like gentleness was upon him.

The house was at once the port of his happiness and his hopes.

Perhaps half an hour had passed when there was another knock at the door. Once more Jessie opened it, and this had barely been done when a man stepped uninvited across the threshold.

Hall Pembroke's heart sunk like lead.

The intruder was Judah Mardwin.

Tall and slender, but formed with a certain quickness and suppleness which suggested panther-like qualities; dark, even swarthy of complexion, with black hair and a long, sweeping mustache; possessed of a smooth, well-formed face which many would have termed handsome, yet with a certain air over him which Mephistopheles could not have excelled; such was Judah Mardwin, the evil genius of Hall Pembroke's troubled life.

The new-comer was well dressed, and as he removed his fashionably-shaped derby hat, a diamond ring glittered upon his hand, but it was not more noticeable than the cool, confident, half-sneering smile which played upon his dusky face.

One glance he shot toward Pembroke, then he seemed to see only Jessie.

"Good-morning, Miss Hollis!" he uttered, in a smooth, well-regulated voice. "I trust I see you well to day."

If his smile was beaming, her expression was correspondingly cold.

"I am quite well," she replied.

"Pleased to hear it, and your appearance corroborates the statement. The roses of health in your cheeks speak for themselves. And, speaking of roses, I have brought a small offering for your mother."

As he spoke he put forward his other hand, and a bouquet of wild-flowers which had before been half-concealed was thrust into prominence.

Hall Pembroke saw, and the stern expression on his face grew sterner. There was a blow at him even in the matter of the flowers. The kinds used, and the arrangement thereof, was such an exact repetition of those he had brought to Mrs. Hollis that there could be no chance about it.

He had gathered the flowers that morning, and arranged them as he sat upon a rock, and it at once flashed upon him that his mocking enemy had been near and had carefully imitated his work.

And this had been done to irritate him.

Mardwin pressed forward and held the bouquet ostentatiously before his rival's eyes.

"Take a look, Pem," he airily requested.

"Quite a fine display, eh? Could you equal it?"

"I might, if I had a model," Hall answered, sullenly.

"Ah! but I should give no one such points. When I set out to be secret I am secret, and no man can over-reach me!"

Here was the exultation of malice, and it carried an intimation that Pembroke was stupid. He felt it, and it irritated him to know that Mardwin had successfully acted the spy, but Jessie saved her lover from reply.

"We are much obliged, Mr. Mardwin, my mother and I," she said, coldly, "but I do not think we need the flowers. They would make a very good ornament to your own room, and I will not rob you."

Hall's face brightened, but Judah was not in the least discomfited.

"Don't mention it, Miss Hollis," he lightly answered. "I have no use for them, and will leave them for your mother."

Calmly he placed the bouquet on the table, and then took a seat uninvited and gave his handsome mustache a twirl.

"You are looking charming, Miss Jessie," he added, airily.

"I have no wish to charm any one," she returned, with dignity.

"Pem and I can't help being charmed, can we, Pem?"

"Don't talk nonsense!" retorted Jessie.

"Not for the world. You're not working to-day, I take it, Pem?"

"We seem about on a level."

"Just about," Judah agreed. "Both are given to making early calls."

"There is such a thing as being too early," Jessie pointedly remarked.

"Just so. Do you take, Pem?"

"I did not address Mr. Pembroke."

"We are both in the same boat; most decidedly in the—same—boat!"

Judah drawled forth the words, and assumed an attitude far more easy than polite. He watched his companion through half-closed eyes, while the old, sneering smile hovered about his lips.

He was like the serpent in Eden. How Pembroke regarded him has already been shown, and Jessie could hardly tolerate his presence. She knew of his fancy for her, and while she disliked him cordially, and regarded him as an unscrupulous and dangerous man, she dared not do as she would with a common man—she dared not send him away.

Readily perceiving that there was bad blood between him and Pembroke, she feared that if she really angered the former, serious trouble would follow.

Thus her fears for her lover led her to endure Judah's society when it was deeply obnoxious to her.

And Judah was cunning enough to see a good deal of all this. Like Jessie, he was ignorant of the fact that Pembroke had a presentiment that he was to kill his rival, but he did see that Jessie hated, and Pembroke feared him.

The man was rushing upon his fate. Little suspecting why Pembroke feared him—ignorant of the letter's fear that he should shed human blood—he attributed all to mere cowardice, and pressed recklessly on. He did not know to what an extent he was tempting fate.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TEMPTER MAKES A SUGGESTION.

JUDAH was master of the situation. He knew how he was detested, and that he was adding to the feeling against him, but, seeing the fear he inspired, he exulted in it, and held his course with great satisfaction.

Conversation lagged. Pembroke would not be drawn into a rash remark, and Jessie refrained from saying anything more against the unwelcome visitor. He had been told plainly enough that he and his presents were not wanted at the cottage—far more plainly than in the present case—and she had seen that he was not to be driven away.

Better accept the inevitable than to precipitate trouble.

One look at the two men was enough to satisfy an observer that if they ever came to blows it would be to Mardwin's sorrow. Agile he might be, but his arms had not the power nature had given to Hall Pembroke, the blacksmith.

This, in a measure, was a consolation to Jes-

sie, but she shivered whenever she thought of it. Confident as she was of her lover's prowess, the mere idea of an encounter between them was alarming. If Judah should be injured, the man she loved would be accountable to the law.

Pembroke had before then tried to tire Judah out during their call at the cottage. He had tried in vain, and this time he made no such attempt.

He finally arose.

"I am going now," he briefly announced.

He moved toward the hall door and Jessie followed him. She closed the door after her, and there seemed a prospect of a few private words, but it was suddenly reopened and Judah appeared, the old smile on his face.

"I'll go along with you, Pem," he announced.

The impulse was strong in Pembroke's mind to give merited chastisement then and there, but his self-control did not forsake him. He made no reply, but shook hands with Jessie and went out. Mardwin extended his own hand, but Jessie ignored it entirely. The rebuff produced no perceptible effect.

"Well, good-morning, Miss Jessie," he lightly said. "Give my kind regards to your mother, and don't tire yourself out working for her. I wouldn't like to see the roses go away from your cheeks. Good-by until I see you again."

He lifted his hat and went out. He had reason to make no delay if he wished to overtake Pembroke, for the latter was moving away with long, quick steps, anxious to see no more of his enemy. Mardwin followed, however, determined to run him down.

Jessie looked after them, her eyes sparkling with indignation.

"The wretch!" she exclaimed; "his impudence is almost unbearable. If only I were a man—"

She paused. Her gaze had wandered to the athletic form of her lover. There was the required man, yet he, instead of being on the field as her defender, was apparently in flight.

A puzzled expression appeared on her face.

"There is something which I don't understand," she confessed, unconsciously speaking aloud. "Hall has always been anxious to shield me from every annoyance, but in the presence of Judah Mardwin, he seems like a different man. He sees that I am annoyed, yet he takes no step to stop it. Of course I don't want he should, but, it seems odd that he don't!"

She puzzled over this fact for a moment, and then added:

"The man appears to exercise some strange influence over Hall, but what it is I don't know. Ah! I am afraid of him! He tries to irritate Hall, and I am afraid they will yet have trouble. Pray Heaven nothing occurs to darken our lives!"

She shielded her eyes and looked after the men, but they were fast disappearing, Pembroke going ahead rapidly and not once looking back; Mardwin following with long steps.

Then the bushes hid them from her view.

Judah was not unmindful of the latter fact, and when once they were practically alone he broke the silence for the first time.

"Pembroke!" he called. "I say, Pem, what the dickens do you mean by tearing along at such a gait? I want to speak with you."

There was no answer. Pembroke gave no sign that he heard, and his speed was not abated.

Mardwin smiled evilly, and then broke into a run and overtook the leader. He caught Hall by the shoulder and spun him around, and the two men were brought face to face.

"Ha! ha! what a queer blade you are!" laughed Judah, mockingly.

Pembroke's face was pale, and there was a wild light in his eyes as he glared at his enemy. His face was pale, and his big hands were clinched with an almost ungovernable impulse to strike the man who had dared to lay hands upon him. His tempter was by his side then, and the lonely mountain-side presented a good field for the settlement of their feud.

He was tempted, but a great effort helped him over the crisis. His tense muscles relaxed, and he stood passive before Mardwin, but he could not govern his expression.

There was a wild glare in his eyes still.

"You ought not to run away from an old friend thus," declared Judah, little suspecting how near the shadow of death was hovering.

"What do you want?" Hall asked in a husky voice.

"Your good company."

"I want nothing of you, sir!"

"Ha! what a jolly dog you are, Pem. Regular wit and humorist, you are. No wonder you and your winning ways have caught onto the fair Jessie!"

Pembroke set his teeth hard.

"We will not mention her."

"Why not? Could we have a fairer subject?"

"Do you call yourself a gentleman?"

"Most surely."

"Then show her respect."

"Bless me, Pem, I always have. You and I are her most devoted slaves."

"Speak for yourself!"

"I will. One of these days I shall give her a chance to marry me."

"Why do you tell this to me?"

"Oh! we'll have you around to the wedding; the sight of your face would be such a fine thing. Pem, you are the most cheerful dog I know!"

Judah made a movement to slap his rival upon the shoulder with assumed hearty good will, but Hall stepped back a pace.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Where you go."

"Your company is not wanted!"

"That so?"

"Yes."

"Another good joke. There's something about you which I like, old man. I never knew how a man can be a brother to another man until you and I get chummy. I feel flattered by your preference for me, Pem!"

"No such preference exists."

"Then why do you seek my company so?"

"I never did; I never want to see you again!"

"Then go away. I'll take care of our Jessie."

Pembroke's heavy brows came down lower, and his eyes glowed fiercely from under cover.

"Take care!" he answered, huskily. "Don't press me too far, Judah Mardwin. The most insignificant creature may turn at bay, and it would not be well for you if I should lose my control."

Mardwin took time to light a cigar nonchalantly.

"What would you do, Pem?" he then asked.

"Heaven help me! I dare not think!"

"Old man, your lack of nerve is surprising. Don't be bashful. If you anticipate giving me a few hundred dollars in the shape of a horse, watch or railroad stock, say so and be done with it. I know how you love me in a manly way, and every proof of your good will is not likely to surprise me. Pem, when Jessie and I are married we shall want you to drop in often."

"You scoundrel!" hissed Pembroke, with sudden fury, "she would not look at you!"

"Oh, as to that, I have her word for it."

"You lie!"

Never before had Pembroke gone so far, and even Mardwin was conscious that he had aggravated him as far as was prudent. He stood with clinched hands, and his muscular form shook with terrible emotion. It would have required little more to make him spring upon his enemy. A mist seemed to roll before his eyes, and the mist was blood-red. His tempter was nearer than ever before; Pembroke imagined he could see him. He stood in the glade, and one hand pointed to Mardwin, and his lips pantomimed, rather than spoke, the words, "Kill! kill!"

Hall Pembroke brushed one hand before his eyes; he made a great effort to control himself; the red mist and the Tempter disappeared; but the haunted man was left weak and trembling.

He sat down on a rock and covered his face with his hands.

If Judah Mardwin had seen fit then to resent the last words spoken to him he could have secured one blow, at least, without opposition, but he saw enough to convince him that Pembroke was physically ill. It was a new phase of the man's character. Mardwin had thought him a weak coward, but, now, he was not prepared to say whether this weakness arose from mere cowardice or some deeper cause.

He little suspected how deep the cause was!

Deciding to rest his persecution for awhile, he smiled sarcastically and observed:

"You don't seem to be very sociable, Pem, and I'll get away to other scenes. I have an engagement to tip the cards at poker with my good friend, Dyckman Harrington. Drop in some day, Pem, and take a hand with us. We're no great at the game, and you may be able to line your pockets with cash."

He paused, hesitated over other words that were in his mind, but finally decided to leave them unsaid.

"Well, so-long!" he added, and then walked briskly away.

Hall Pembroke did not stir. He was dimly conscious of what Mardwin said, but there was nothing coherent in his consciousness. He realized that his enemy had gone, but this conveyed but little to his mind, and the fact soon escaped his memory. There was a tumult in his mind, and he waited for clearness of perception because he could do nothing more then.

Minutes passed, and then he raised his head. He looked around, and, seeing no one, drew a deep, quivering sigh.

"He is gone!" he muttered. "Gone, and without knowing how near he came to his fate. I wonder at my own self-control. He touched me to the quick, yet I withheld my hand. How did I do it? Can it be that Tyrington Perham's advice has borne fruit, and that I am overcoming my temptation? No, no; I cannot hope that. I remember that my attack went further than ever before. I was not only tempted, but I saw the Tempter!"

The recollection brought a fit of shivering, and he hurriedly arose.

"I'll go away before Mardwin can return. I have borne all I can, and I dread to think what I may do if that shadowy Thing ever again stands before me, points to Mardwin as it pointed then, and tells me to 'Kill! kill!' Heaven help me!—Heaven save that man and me from our fates!"

CHAPTER XIII.

TROUBLE BESETS THE PREACHER.

CAZRINA entered the room where the Reverend Tyrington Perham was busy over his sermon.

"May I interrupt you, uncle?" she asked.

"Certainly, my dear," he answered.

"I wish to speak about Mrs. Bastion."

The timid minister grew flurried at once.

"What about her, Czarina?"

"Did you say she was an old friend of yours?"

"Yes, certainly—that is, in a measure. She was once my parishioner."

He was nervous over his answer, and had ended by telling an out-and-out falsehood; a fact which at once dawned upon him and added to his confusion.

"Is she here," persisted Czarina, "in the role of a privileged guest?"

"Yes—I think so. What do you mean?"

"I don't like her!" declared Czarina.

"Why not?" Perham faltered.

"She is very disagreeable. She is evidently determined to rule this house. Nothing is done to suit her, and she is going to upset all our customs. She has been talking to Mrs. Granger and Harp Moy, and has them about deranged with her freaks and impudent orders. She has tried it on me, but, luckily, I am not upset easily. If I was, one other thing would have completed the havoc. Mrs. Bastion persists in showering her tenderness upon me. Fancy it! Ugh!"

Czarina shivered a genuine shiver, whereupon Mr. Perham faltered:

"It is probably her way."

"A very poor way she has, then. I don't aspire to be petted by her. What if she should try it on you, uncle?"

The minister experienced a sensation as though his hair was trying to stand on end.

"Don't mention it!" he exclaimed, hastily.

"Of course," pursued Czarina, with a business air, "if you have brought her here as a privileged guest she has a good deal due her, but she can hardly expect to rule the whole house."

"Decidedly not."

"Perhaps you had better see her."

"See her!"

"Yes."

"I—I am very busy."

Just then Mr. Perham wished himself busy a hundred miles away.

"So is Mrs. Bastion. She is turning the house upside down, if I may use such an undignified expression, and she seems to labor under the impression that it is her privilege. Is that true?"

"No."

"Then tell her so!"

Czarina spoke in a decided tone, but Mr. Perham felt that he had as soon go out and face several grizzly bears as Esther Bastion.

"My dear, I can't stop now, but I will see the lady presently."

"I hope you will. I trust, uncle, that I have never shown a desire to claim more than my right in your house as its mistress, made so by you; and that I have never failed to show respect to the guests brought here by friendship or by the position you hold."

Czarina had spoken temperately from the beginning, and her manner was thoroughly womanly as she made this appeal for his support. She had been all that Tyrington Perham could desire as mistress of the house, too, and he hastened to reply.

"Bless me, Czarina, you have done your duty nobly. The prudent care and good sense you have manifested would have done credit, high credit, even to a woman of twice your years."

"Thank you, uncle."

Czarina smiled upon the old gentleman and withdrew, but he was left in a mood incompatible with smiles. When she was gone he sunk back into his chair with an expression of profound dismay.

"The mischief has begun!" he groaned. "I might have known it would begin. It is not in that woman's nature to use discretion or judgment. She has the will to institute chaos here, and even her own interests do not seem sufficient to control her propensities to mischief. I must use a firm hand; I'll send for her at once!"

He arose and took two steps toward the door, but paused in the middle of the floor. He hesitated and looked back at the table, which was scattered with loose leaves of his projected sermon.

"Perhaps I had better finish my work here, first," he observed. "Yes; on the whole, I think I will write my sermon first. Something might otherwise occur which would distract my thoughts."

There was something amusing, as well as pitiable, in this argument. He postponed seeing Mrs. Bastion merely because he was afraid of her, and he knew it. He had an excuse, and he seized upon it eagerly. His negative nature was not one to cope with the intruder in his household, which he knew equally well.

As to the distraction of his thoughts that could not be increased. Czarina's report showed him that what hopes he might have entertained

that Esther would use some prudence were not to be realized, and he was in condition thoroughly demoralized.

He resumed his seat and went at his papers as though it would be the easiest thing in the world to finish the work, but in less than one minute he was leaning idly back in his chair without one thought of the sermon.

Esther ruled his mind as completely as she evidently intended to rule the house.

"What can I do?" he thought. "I feel sure she will be deaf to reason, and if I set down my foot, and try to compel her to behave, she will reveal that miserable affair of the past. My honor as a preacher of the Gospel will be destroyed, and I feel sure it will kill Czarina, poor child! What a wretched, wretched affair!"

He arose and began to pace the room nervously, but a turn toward the window gave him a view of the street, and he saw Czarina going out, evidently upon a business errand.

He seized upon the chance thus offered and determined to see Esther at once. Feeling sure that she would be as pert and flippant as ever, he dreaded the result if Czarina was aware that she defied him. Obviously, the best way was to see her at once.

Acting on this idea he opened the door, and, for once, at least, chance favored him. Esther was just passing, and though the sight of her squat, corpulent figure gave him an unpleasant turn, he raised his voice.

"Ahem! Mrs. Bastion!"

She turned and dropped a clumsy courtesy.

"Ah! most worshipful sir, are you there?" she responded, with easy levity.

"Yes, Mrs. Bastion, and—ahem!—I would like to see you in my study for a moment, if you will come."

"If I will! Why, Tyrie, I shall be delighted. It has always been my chief ambition to see you at work. How things have changed since the days when you used to come courtin' me! You are now a grave an' reverend curer o' men's sins, an' you fill the office as gracefully as a grasshopper in a mud-puddle. Pray excuse the comparison, Tyrie, but you know you be built some like a grasshopper!"

Esther rattled on volubly, and, having dropped her ponderous form into a chair, smiled into his face with great contentment.

"How natural it is to set opposite you as we used to do in our courtin'-days, Tyrie!" she added, but the perceptible intention, to aggravate him prevented any sentimental interpretation of her remark.

Perham ignored what she said and came to the point at once, though with great nervousness.

"How are you getting on here, Mrs. Bastion?"

"Beautifully, Tyrie!"

"Do you like the house?"

"It is charmin'."

"Do you think you will enjoy your—your visit?"

"Rapturously, you dear old soul!"

"I need scarcely remind you that prudence on your part is necessary."

"Why, prudence?"

"We have made a compact," explained Perham, with growing firmness, "and you have agreed to conduct yourself with moderation and judgment."

"True."

"Have you done so?"

"Yes."

"Reports are not to that effect."

"No? What do reports say?"

"That you are forgetting your position as a guest, and trying to domineer over the household."

Mr. Perham was quite astonished by his own boldness, and his courage wavered when he saw Mrs. Bastion's eyes sparkle with sudden anger. It was only a transient flame, and then she was her old cool, easy self.

"Have you really come to the point at last, Tyrie?" she flippantly asked. "Took you a long while to get down to business, didn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh! I knew somethin' was comin'."

"There was good reason why something should come. It was a condition of our compact that you should conduct yourself with discretion here. Have you done so? Or have you meddled with the housekeeper, Mrs. Granger, and with even Harp Moy?"

"Keep nothin' back. Why not add the name of our fair Czarina?"

"I presume it might be added."

"No doubt; for 'twas from her you got your dose of spite. She has been here an' made a kick. Hum! I suspected it at the time! So she objects to me, does she? Don't want me 'round, I dare say. Lord, Lord! how funny it is! Does she know, does she know who I am, an' what I be to her?"

There was a curious mixture of malevolence and mocking sarcasm in her manner, and the poor, vacillating minister felt himself under process of torture.

"Thank heaven! she does not know!" he returned, fervently.

"Then she shall!" declared Esther, with a short, hard laugh. "Before she puts on more airs she shall know the truth!"

CHAPTER XIV.

CZARINA RECEIVES A WARNING.

PERHAM heard this assertion with dismay.

"You promised not to reveal anything to her," he remonstrated.

Esther made a disdainful gesture.

"What of that? I won't be abused by her."

"Indeed, she did not abuse you. The servants have been confused by your—your indiscretions, and order would soon be at an end. That is not the worst of it. A man is expected to have some authority in his own house. If I have none, Czarina will soon perceive that something is wrong."

"Let her come to me; I can explain."

"Mrs. Bastion, I implore you to be prudent."

"I am, Tyrie; I am; but be run over I won't, so there, now! Obey that girl, indeed! Why, she ought to obey me, an' I can tell her why."

"But I thought you said you would regard a home here for a few days as a good thing."

"So is my dignity!"

Esther spread out her voluminous skirts and illustrated, in her own opinion, the dignity she so much prized; but candor compels the confession that it was the dignity of the overgrown toad and the fattened ox.

"Something must be done!" groaned Perham.

"Somethin' shall be done!"

"What?"

"My rights shall be had!"

"Woman, why will you persist in such stubbornness?" demanded the minister, with another ripple of courage. "What do I gain by giving you shelter here, if you are to do all the mischief you can?"

"Put that into plain English!"

"I will. If you persist in your course you will have to leave the parsonage."

"No, I shan't, parson. You have let me in here, an' I'm goin' to hold my grip. Ef I am let alone, I shan't do any great damage, but I'm goin' to have the rights due a lady. I'm not to be run over by you, her or nobody else; an' I won't set down like a nun or a Niobrara bathed in tears—not much. I'm goin' to move about the house an' have my say, but I won't tell that moldy old secret ef I can help it. But, Parson Perham, try to send me away, an' Czarina shall know all the family secrets right off quick. That's my persition, Tyrie; now chew on it all you wish!"

Tyrington Perham looked aghast at the speaker. Her coarseness, a familiarity, impudence and malevolence were altogether more than he felt able to combat or endure, and he suddenly exclaimed:

"I wish I had never seen you!"

Esther laughed sarcastically.

"You didn't feel that way when you came courtin' me."

"Forbear!—in mercy's name, forbear!"

"Then use some horse sense."

With this unladylike advice Esther arose.

"Am I ordered to leave your house?" she added.

"No."

"All right; I'll stay an' be useful. Can I help you about your sermon?"

"No, no."

"My dear Pansy has a great head; shall I send her to you? She can use a pen masterfully."

"Mrs. Bastion, will you leave me alone? Wait!—one word before you go. Won't you get along here as quietly as possible? You are not asked to do any work, so pray refrain from interfering with those who have work to do. Let us get along in peace and harmony; it will be to our mutual advantage. Czarina is as well-meaning as she is high-spirited, and will require nothing unjust of you. Pray get along well with her."

"Do you put as much pathos, fire an' logic in your sermons as in that address?" inquired Esther, with sarcasm. "Tyrie, you are a great old boy! When you was a-courtin' me you was about the greenest shrub I ever seen, an' the tree is like the shrub. Don't you worry, Tyrie; I know my business, an' I'll act accordingly."

With this unpromising remark she opened the door and went out. The door closed, and the Reverend Tyrington Perham was alone. He drew a sigh which seemed to come from a limitless distance.

He had engaged Esther in battle, and had been routed as completely as any army had ever been routed.

Instead of securing from her a promise that she would mend her ways, he had been forced from his own position; he had made absolutely no gain, but had lost all that he had striven for. He had been defied in his own house; Esther had declared that she would not leave, or what was equivalent to it.

She had said that if she was ordered to go she would tell her secret to Czarina. That settled it. Tyrington Perham felt that he would endure everything sooner than have her speak.

"It would ruin Czarina's life!" he murmured; "her pride could not stand the shock. No; I dare not molest Mrs. Bastion. But how am I to account to Czarina for tolerating her conduct?"

Here was a problem as hard as any he had grappled with for many a day, and he found no solution of it.

After some time passed in useless thought he turned his gaze upon his notes and sighed again. What a contrast there was between this day and those that had preceded it! For years he had been accustomed to sit down in the privacy of his room and, without an annoying care or sound, build up his sermons in a way as eloquent and logical as was in his power. Now, all that was peaceful within and without was gone, and he could no more fix his attention upon his work than he could move the house.

In the mean while, Czarina had walked to the opposite end of the village, her object being to transact some errand at the store with which she did not care to trust Harp Moy.

Thus far she did not suspect how much of a storm was brewing at the parsonage, and Esther Bastion was not in her thoughts.

When her errand was performed she started home. The village of Si Gotch was built on both sides of a gulch extended from the rough region known as the Bottomless Pits. Through this gulch ran a small stream which had its source in the rough region before mentioned. It was in many places a dangerous feature of the town, for the rocky walls at points presented a cliff a hundred feet high, and already one miner had fallen down and been mangled and killed on the rocks below.

Passage was safe, however, if the traveler used the bridge which had been made at one narrow point.

With the same erratic fancy which had prompted the naming of the barren country as "The Bottomless Pits," the gulch was known as "The Purgatory Road," and a timid person, looking down the black fissure, might have thought the name very applicable.

Czarina had crossed on the strong bridge too many times to be influenced in any way by it, and she walked briskly along the homeward road.

At each end of the bridge the ground rose somewhat, forming a slight ridge, and when in the depression, little was to be seen but the gulch and the bridge. Even to the right and left the view was intercepted, for the ridge was bordered with bushes.

She reached the bridge and started to cross; then she looked up and saw that she was not the only traveler near the place. A man was coming down the opposite slope, and she at once recognized him to be Dyckman Harrington.

She was quite sure he had not been visible when she was on the west side of the gulch, which would seem to indicate that he had just emerged from the bushes; but as she was not interested in Dyckman Harrington, she gave the matter but a passing thought.

They met at the end of the bridge, and he raised his hat politely.

"Good-morning, Miss King," he said. "I did not expect to see you here."

"I am on my way home."

With this brief reply she was about to pass on, but he spoke quickly:

"Excuse me, but I have more to say, Miss King."

"I am in haste," she answered, pausing.

"I will detain you but a moment. I hear that you had an adventure, yesterday."

"A slight one—yes."

"Shall you ride Charon again?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"He seems dangerous."

"He will not be allowed to overcome me again."

"Bravely said! If he ran again, your rescuer might not be at hand."

"I can take care of Charon!" Czarina calmly asserted.

"By the way, what did you think of Jameson?"

"He kindly did me a favor; I know no more about the gentleman."

"Report says he is scarcely a gentleman."

"I am indifferent to what report says."

"Surely, you do not uphold Jameson, Miss King?"

"Have you heard me uphold him?"

"Hardly, but I inferred as much."

"You had better infer no more. It is a bad habit."

Czarina spoke with serene indifference, and moved a step, but Harrington quickly added:

"I wish to tell you just what sort of a man Kit Jameson is. Everybody here ought to know the truth, for he has forced himself in upon our society, and such a man has amazing capabilities for evil. He is evil, Miss King, clear through. There is scarcely a disreputable scrape he has not been in, and there are some places where they would as soon tolerate a leper as this same Kit Jameson."

"What have I to do with all this?"

"Do you blame me for warning you?"

"Why should you warn me?"

"Why, because—well, you and he have become acquainted, you know, and—"

"Wrong, Mr. Harrington! He and I have not become acquainted, and your statement in regard to the gentleman does not interest me in the least."

A hand was laid upon Harrington's shoulder.

"Tastes differ," said a quiet voice; "your statement interests me deeply!" Harrington turned quickly. Kit Jameson stood before him.

CHAPTER XV.

KIT LAYS DOWN THE LAW.

THE presence of Saddle-Chief Kit was a surprise to Czarina and Harrington. They had been facing toward a common point, and away from Kit, and his footsteps had not been heard. Harrington seemed dumfounded by the interruption, but the new-comer had never been more at ease.

"Being interested in the party you name," added Kit, "whatever concerns him interests me. Of what crimes did you say he had been guilty?"

"You ought to know," muttered Dike.

"At first blush one would say I ought, but it seems that you have superior sources of information. I will trouble you for points. You have made certain charges—be so good as to give your proof."

"Do you threaten me?"

"I asked for proof."

"I do not think the presence of a lady is any place for a quarrel," explained Harrington, who was quaking in his boots.

"Who intends to quarrel? I don't. All I ask is that you prove what you assert. As long as you tell what is true, I will not enter one complaint, but if you get over the line of veracity, I may feel constrained to put you aright. I am not ashamed to own up to my own record, but I accept no false one. See?"

Calm and even was Kit's voice, and Czarina could not complain that he was forcing a quarrel in her presence. Indeed, she would have been at a loss to know whether he was in earnest or joking had not Harrington's manner betrayed fear.

As she disliked both men, she now cut short her share in the interview by walking quickly away.

Harrington evinced a disposition to follow, but Kit added in a more resolute voice:

"Stay where you are! You and I must settle this matter at once. What do you mean by lying about me?"

"What right had you to act the spy?" cried Dike, trying to be brave.

"The right of any man who hears himself traduced. I came up in a natural way; you were too much interested to hear me; I overheard you lying about me, and took part in the conversation. Harrington, you are a scoundrel!"

"Be careful!"

"What now?"

"I will not bear much more."

"You and I are of one mind; I have borne about all I will. I came quietly into this town, and you at once tried to jump on me with your heelers, put the honest folks against me, and get me sent out of town. Now, you are continuing your game. You lied to Miss King. What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing."

"Yes, you are, Harrington."

"How do you know?"

"You are going to the lady and retract."

"Never!"

"Then you will get a trouncing. Look you, Dike Harrington, I am not a man to be trifled with. Nobody can say that I am naturally quarrelsome, but I decline to be lied about. Will you go to Miss King and take back all you say?"

Harrington's face was pale, but he stubbornly replied:

"No!"

"Think again!"

"I refuse to do it."

"You will retract or take the consequences!"

Kit was calm, but his manner was full of determination. He laid one hand heavily on Harrington's shoulder. The latter made a vain effort to shake off the grasp.

"Let me go, curse you!" he exclaimed.

"Not until you promise."

"Then take that!"

Harrington hissed the words through his white lips, and as he spoke his right hand, which had been held behind him, suddenly shot forward. The rays of the sun beat down in the depression, and they fell upon the blade of a knife. Bright gleams shot out as the weapon flashed toward Kit's body, sped by a murderous hand, but the knife did not reach its selected victim.

Kit had kept a wary eye upon his rival, and he had not failed to observe all. Now he made a clutch, and his fingers closed around Harrington's wrist. There was a brief struggle and the knife was wrested away, but it did not end there.

Harrington was fairly embarked in the contest, and though his courage was at lowest ebb, he saw no way except to keep it up.

He struck at Kit, only to have the blow parried, and then they grappled. Neither was lacking in strength, and Harrington made up in desperation what he lacked in courage.

Back and forth they struggled for a moment,

and then their feet struck upon the bridge. Instantly a scheme occurred to Harrington. If he could throw Kit over the bridge it would be sure death. A hundred feet below the little stream ran over jagged rocks.

A fall there could have but one result.

He put forth all his efforts. Managing to swing Kit around next to the lower side of the bridge he made a great attempt to force him back. To him it seemed that his strength was akin to a giant's, and a cruel smile parted his lips as he imagined his rival thus easily removed from his path.

It would be a quick settlement of the feud.

We often "reckon without our host," and Dyckman Harrington was not free from the failings and failures of men.

Even as he dreamed of triumph he suddenly found himself lying upon his back, with Kit kneeling upon him.

"Yield!" the victor sternly uttered.

Harrington saw a pair of flashing eyes above him, and all his courage vanished.

"I yield!" he gasped.

"And will you go to Miss King and confess that you lied about me?"

"Give me time," implored the vanquished man.

"No!"

"Until night—"

"Not an hour."

"But I did not mean to—"

"I do not care what you meant; I know what you said. Will you go at once and retract?"

Harrington hesitated.

"It will be the worse for you if you don't. You tried to hurl me over into the gulch. Don't tempt me to serve you in your own style."

He made a suggestive movement, and Harrington cried out sharply:

"Don't! don't!" he exclaimed. "I will do as you wish. Don't kill me!"

"Will you go to Miss King now?"

"Yes."

Kit made a quick movement, and set his captive on his feet. He turned his face toward the east.

"March!" he tersely ordered.

Harrington obeyed. There was an abundance of rebellion in his mind, but it was over-weighted by fear. He had seen something of Kit's mettle, and dared not anger him further then. It would be a most bitter experience, but he would live in hope. There were ruffians in Si Gotch who would readily do his bidding, and he would call them to his aid.

It was Saddle-Chief Kit's hour of triumph, but Harrington silently vowed that the penalty of that triumph should be the victor's life.

Suddenly he turned his face toward the east and walked away, and at his heels came Kit.

"One word more," the latter added. "When we get to the parsonage I want you to wind up this matter in due form. I desire you to express yourself in substance as follows: Tell Miss King that you have come to undo a wrong. Say to her that you have made statements against me without due reflection, and, on second thought, you wish to retract. Add that you had no personal knowledge of what you said against me, and that you are convinced that you stated what was not true. You see I save you the pain of confessing that you told an outright lie."

Harrington set his teeth in impotent rage, but did not venture any reply. Words would be thrown away at that juncture; deeds might prove potent at a future time.

It was not a long journey to Perham's, and they soon neared the door. Harrington felt about as cheerful as a soldier might who was going to be shot. His feet were heavy, and inclined to lag, but Kit marched mercilessly behind him.

They reached the door.

"Knock!" Kit directed. "The more neatly you do your work, afterwards, the better you will get out of it."

Harrington knocked.

Czarina had reached the house and put away her hat. She chanced to be near the door when the knock sounded, and it was she who answered. A slight shade of surprise appeared on her face at sight of her rival suitors, but her dislike for both caused her to assume a look of annoyance.

Harrington roused to meet the emergency and spoke in a voice both sullen and rapid:

"Miss King, I want to refer to what I said about Jameson. Far be it from me to do ill to any one; so I will add that I am by no means sure he is as bad as you may have understood me to represent. I have no personal knowledge in the matter."

"And am convinced that I was in error," prompted Kit.

"And am convinced that I was in error," sulkily repeated Harrington.

"He wishes to do justice, Miss King, you see," explained the victor, "and as he knows absolutely nothing against me, he is willing to admit it. Eh, sir?"

There was a struggle in Harrington's mind, but he felt that Kit's sharp gaze was upon him

—he would not look that way—and he muttered one word:

"Yes."

"What is all this to me?" demanded Czarina, coldly. "Why come to say this?"

"We wanted the facts known to you," Kit replied.

"You took unnecessary trouble, sir. I do not care whether you are a minister or an escaped convict!"

Harrington's face lighted up with exultation.

"We were well aware that you would not care," Kit returned, composedly. "We were governed in our course by general principles."

"I do not see what I had to do with it, but I trust you are satisfied. If you are through I will bid you good-day."

"We are quite through, thank you. Good-day!"

The door closed, and the men were left standing alone. Kit looked as cheerful as though the call had been a marked success.

"All right, Harrington," he said. "I'll excuse you now."

His rival was strongly tempted to taunt him, for he felt overjoyed at Czarina's coldness, but he wisely concluded not to provoke Kit further. Without a word he walked away. When he had gone a few rods he turned and looked back. The Prairie Centaur was sauntering in the opposite direction, quietly smoking a cigar.

Harrington scowled dramatically.

"You have won this time, and you have humiliated me to the lowest degree!" he uttered, aloud; "but the end is not yet. I have more reason than ever to hate you, and it shall be your life or mine. If you think you can come into this town and act the bully you are woefully mistaken. Within the hour I will find men who will do my bidding, and if they don't give you cause for repentance before another day dawns, I will freely admit that I have lost my cunning!"

With these words he resumed his course, but the plans in his mind did not grow less ominous.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TRIBULATIONS OF A CHINAMAN.

NIGHT had fallen, and the hour had grown so late that the lights had disappeared from most of the houses in Si Gotch. Harp Moy, the Chinese servant, had made his preliminary preparation for retiring. This consisted of a substantial smoke. He was not addicted to opium, but tobacco he considered the best friend he had on the wrong side of the Flowery Land.

Harp Moy arose to his feet and yawned.

There was a knock at his door.

"Who wantee mlore work?" muttered he, sulkily.

The knock was repeated; he opened the door; Czarina stood outside with her out-door garments on.

"Come with me, Harp Moy," she directed, kindly, but with an air of authority. "Stay! Is your hat here? Put it on!"

Harp Moy opened his almond-shaped eyes a little wider. He could not imagine what all this foretold. He, however, was as devoted to his young mistress as a dog to its master, and he put on his hat with cheerful obedience.

"Now follow me," Czarina added.

Once more he obeyed, and she led the way to the kitchen. In the middle of the floor stood a large basket. It was covered over with a cloth, but he could see enough to discover that it was well-filled with something—what, he could not tell.

"Take the basket and follow me again!"

"Gloee up-stairs?" asked Harp Moy.

"Go where I go."

The answer was brief, but it was not curt. The young lady spoke graciously, and Harp Moy felt that he would gladly follow her anywhere she saw fit to lead. He lifted the basket, which he found to be heavy, and Czarina opened the door.

"Go out, and I will lock the door after us," she added.

Again Harp Moy's eyes expanded. He was not the bravest man alive, and as he knew that lawless deeds were sometimes committed in Si Gotch after dark, and that Chinamen were not favorites there, he would very much have preferred to be on the inside when the door was locked. However, he went out, shrinking back a little from the darkness, and stood still while his mistress locked the door.

"Now let us go," she added.

"Gloee where?"

"Never mind; you will see, presently."

She started, and he had no choice but to follow. His mind was in a state of doubt and confusion. Added to the fact that he was afraid was the additional fact that he was wholly at a loss to account for the night journey. Where were they going? What was the burden he bore? He tilted the basket a little. No sound resulted; the burden was there, but it was a motionless burden. He hoped it was not a human being, and had never been, but he was not sure. Perhaps he was being made party to some crime.

Only the confidence he had in his young mistress kept the picture of a gallows from rising in his mind.

Czarina walked on without another word. She knew there was not much danger of meeting any one, and no one was met. Their course was toward the region fantastically called "The Bottomless Pits," and Harp Moy suddenly became conscious that they were getting quite near the undesirable vicinity.

He spoke to Czarina; she did not answer; and he bent his back again and went on with his burden. Perhaps he breathed a prayer to some Power to look after him, but he hoped more from Czarina than from other sources.

He hoped she would not go much further, and he was not disappointed.

The dividing line between "The Bottomless Pits" and the more cheerful part of the world was a sharp, radical one. Czarina paused at that point, and as Harp Moy looked at the black, ominous area ahead the muscles of his legs seemed in danger of collapse.

"Harp Moy," said Czarina, in a clear voice, "are you a discreet man?"

"Welly much."

"Can you keep a secret?"

"Welly good."

"Have I been a kind mistress to you?"

"Never had a bletter one."

"Well, the time has come for you to show your devotion to me. I am about to trust you in a matter of great importance, and I hope you will not betray my confidence."

"What we gloing to do?"

"We are going there!"

She pointed to the area of desolation.

"Oh! oh!" breathed, rather than spoke, Harp Moy.

"Are you afraid?"

"Yes."

"Of what?"

"Me 'flaid of the ghostees an' splirits!"

"Nonsense! there is nothing there to harm you."

"Mlinister tell me 'blout Levil One that live in blottomless pitee."

"Listen to me, Moy! We are now dealing with no matters of theology or of superstition, but with a tract of land which, I admit, is not agreeable. All the more reason why we may safely go there; where nothing exists to call any one else we shall meet no one."

"P'laps we mleet ghostees."

"Moy, you are getting too much civilized! Ghosts exist only in ignorant minds. The miners of Si Gotch have put foolish ideas in your mind; the sooner you get rid of them, the better. No one will harm us: no one will meet us. Will you go?"

Harp Moy cast another dubious glance ahead.

"S'plose I shall have to," he replied.

"And will you promise to never tell what you see during our journey?"

Harp Moy had serious doubts as to his ever having a chance to tell, but he was embarked on the venture, and as Czarina was the only one upon whom his simple nature could lean, he was very ready to win her approval by giving the desired promise.

He did so, and Czarina continued:

"We will advance again. Be a little careful, or you may fall into some chasm."

Again the Chinaman's eyes dilated. Burdened as he was with the basket he would have but little chance to save himself from any danger, and he had heard it said that in the desolate area there were crevices and pits which literally had no bottom.

It was a dismal outlook, and his Celestial heart was heavy as he cautiously followed his guide.

Whatever mysterious object influenced Czarina, she showed no doubt or fear. Pressing steadily forward, she selected her course readily, and for some time showed no doubt as to the footing. At the end of ten minutes, however, she paused, and using matches she carried, lighted a torch. Harp Moy noticed that the torch had evidently served the same purpose before, but he was past wonder.

He was not past fear, and his nerves were soon severely tested.

The way abruptly grew rough and dangerous. Cavities of all shapes yawned near their feet, and even Czarina condescended to pick her way with care. The light showed crevices which showed no bottom, and they often trod narrow shelves of rock which, suspended over some pit, trembled under their feet.

Harp Moy was too much terrified to think of stopping or turning back. He clung to his basket desperately and had but one thought—to avoid a fatal plunge into the dark pits.

Fortunately, this did not last long. After half an hour, which seemed to be an age to the Chinaman, his fair guide paused.

"You have done well, Moy," she observed, her matter-of-fact voice tinged with genuine approval. "This is not a pleasant place to travel, but you have shown great good courage."

Moy set out to speak, but discovered that if he tried to use his jaws they would probably rattle with fear. He wished to set the seal of his commendation on her verdict, but perhaps it was just as well that he let his alleged heroism go without amendment.

"I will now relieve you of the basket," calmly added Czarina. "I am going a little further,

but you may remain here. Sit down on that rock!"

Her servant obeyed, but soon had cause for fresh fear. She took the basket and started off, retaining the light. Harp Moy broke forth at once.

"Wh-wh-what you gloin' to do?" he demanded.

"Never mind; you have only to wait here."

"But I dlon't likee the dark."

"The dark will not bite you. Be still, you foolish fellow."

She did not pause to give this advice, and by the time it was uttered she was several yards away, and the darkness was closing around the Chinaman. A more miserable man it would have been hard to find. He was not so sure that the dark would not "bite him," and if "the dark" was merciful, would the "ghosts" be so?

He clasped his hands over his knees and rolled his eyes frantically, but there he was left; and Czarina receded steadily until a point of rock hid her, and he was abandoned to face the ghosts alone.

The burden was too much for him to bear, and he arose and took a forward step. He felt as though he must be near his mistress and the light. What errand had brought her there he did not know—perhaps she had come to visit those same ghosts he feared so much—but he could face danger much better in company than alone.

He made only one step, and then, remembering the pits, went down on his hands and knees, and began to crawl in the direction Czarina had gone. Forward, little by little, he progressed, and in a humble way he had long since abandoned, but he would have gone snake-fashion, as far as pride was concerned.

He was a long time in going a hundred feet, and his fears increased, if possible, every moment he was in the darkness; but the point of rock was at last gained, and he saw the glow of the torch ahead.

Somewhat encouraged he increased his speed, and a peculiar fact was soon apparent. The light was stationary, and it shone from a hut.

Even Harp Moy was surprised to find such a thing there, where no one was supposed ever to have passed a night. Moy paused, but inquisitiveness was now added to his other motives, and he determined to see more.

The hut might be the dwelling-place of some sort of demon, but if Czarina visited him on friendly terms, she would naturally protect her servant from him.

It did not take Moy long to reach the hut, but he was prudent enough not to venture into the light which streamed from the door. He moved around to one side, and then paused to listen.

Conversation was going on inside. He distinguished Czarina's voice—then a deeper, heavier voice sounded. It was that of a man.

Harp Moy strained his ears to the utmost, greedy to overhear what was said, but only a vague murmur reached his hearing. Coherent speech he could not grasp.

Finding himself foiled in this respect, he tried to make use of his eyes, but the walls of the hut failed him there. The outside was of woven branches, chiefly those of pine trees, but something more solid seemed to be beyond. Harp Moy poked the obstacle, but without success.

There was a mystery inside, and it was beyond his reach. He could see only by going to the door, and that he dared not do.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SCENE IN THE ABYSS.

HARP MOY was not a practical man, and he was by no means certain whether Czarina had come to meet a human being or a demon. The Chinaman had an idea that the first did not dwell in that region and that the second did, but he was not able to say in which list the girl's present companion should be placed.

Had a practical person been at hand he would have been as much puzzled as Harp Moy, though in a different direction.

Since Czarina had been a resident of Si Gotch she had been noted for a retiring disposition which was so tinged with friendliness that she was not considered proud; and she had made but few acquaintances whom she ever visited. Moreover, she had given all young men who were moved by her charms a decided rebuff, and had become known as a man-hater.

With the exception of Mr. Perham, no man in Si Gotch could claim that friendly relations existed between him and Miss King.

When this fact was considered it might well be regarded as remarkable that she had made a night journey to the Bottomless Pits, daring various dangers, to meet the unknown who was there.

Who was he?

What was the power that had drawn Czarina there?

What had been her object in coming?

All this was mysterious enough, but to it must be added the fact no one was supposed to live in the Bottomless Pits, and that every one avoided the place as a region too gloomy, barren and dangerous, with its crevices, for them to visit.

Who, then, was he who had a hut there?

Harp Moy was not able to decide, and, gradually, his curiosity died away. Once more he began to think of his surroundings, and he was very much of the opinion that he would be a lucky Chinaman if he ever got away alive.

One thing only gave him hope. If Czarina was not afraid of the demons—who *did* exist, he now felt positive—it must be that she had some influence over them. Perhaps she would save him, especially as his back had borne the basket which, he believed, contained tribute to them.

On the whole, it might be better for him to go back and risk the demons that lurked in the dark than to remain by the hut, be detected, and thus incur the enmity of the demon that dwelt there.

It was a sore trial, but Harp Moy turned and crept half-way back to where he had been left.

He was none too soon, for only a few minutes had passed when Czarina appeared with the torch and the basket. She walked quickly forward, and soon reached her servant.

He saw a suspicious glance bent upon him.

"I did not leave you here," she observed.

"I was 'flaid," Moy explained, humbly.

"Afraid of what?"

"The splirits."

"Nonsense! Did you follow me any further than this?"

Her gaze was bent sharply upon him, but his face was not one easy to read.

"No," he answered.

"Are you telling the truth?"

"Harp Moy never tlell lie to lady."

Czarina would have preferred proof to his word, but she let the matter drop.

"We will go back, now. Take the basket!"

He obeyed. Nothing remained inside except the cloth which had covered the former contents, and he inferred that the "demons" had obtained their tribute. He hoped they were satisfied, as it would greatly improve their own chances of getting out of the Pits alive.

Czarina led the way once more and began to move cautiously through the maze of gulches and crevices, but they were not done with adventure. Perhaps forty rods had been passed in their slow, bazardous way when Czarina suddenly stopped. Her gaze was fixed on a point to one side, but not long did she stand inactive.

With a quick movement she flung the torch behind a boulder.

Harp Moy uttered a dolorous cry; the loss of the torch seemed to him to presage sure death; they could never get out of the Pits if compelled to move in darkness.

"Be silent!" uttered Czarina, sharply.

"We shall fall—"

"Silence! Don't you see we are no longer alone?"

Czarina spoke in a suppressed voice, and her pointing finger directed Moy's gaze. He looked, and a strange scene was presented to his view.

Off to the right the blackness of the night—it seemed darker in the Pits than anywhere else—was broken by the blaze of several torches. They were irregularly grouped, and revealed a background of rock with several figures. Human being or otherwise, they had an earthly look, and the torches burned like common torches, but there certainly was something peculiar and weird about the scene.

They seemed to stand on empty air, but back of them rose the cliff, and below was a black abyss which, so far as could be seen, might be bottomless.

"The splirits!" gasped Harp Moy.

Czarina turned upon him angrily.

"Utter another word and I will leave you alone!" she imperiously declared.

The Chinaman dropped upon his knees; he had not the courage to look further. He covered his face and deemed himself somewhat safer thereby.

Czarina was again intently watching.

The figures on the cliff moved. The foremost swung his torch and took a step lower down; the others followed. Slowly and laboriously they descended into the abyss.

Czarina was perplexed. She had not been prepared for this sight, and knew not how to account for it. What had brought the men to that place? There was no gold in the Pits to lure the miner, and no organized band of outlaws near Si Gotch.

What attraction the Pits could have for men, honest or dishonest, she could not conceive.

The men went lower, and if any one had believed them to be spirits treading empty air, their movements would have dispelled the idea. Their progress was slow and laborious, indicating that they were using a pathway of rocks, and one difficult and dangerous.

The torches, free from any breath of air, burned steadily. Their light fell upon the cliff, which looked grim and dark; it fell upon the figures of the men, which were not less grim or less dark.

At last they came to a halt. They were considerably below the level of where Czarina stood, and as they gathered in a group they seemed to find ample room, but the gulf still stretched below them.

They engaged in conversation, and seemed to

arrive at some understanding. They moved on again, restlessly, and some object was to be seen lying at their feet. A suspicion flashed upon Czarina. During their descent she had noticed that one man appeared to receive aid from his companions, and it had occurred to her that he might be wounded.

A new idea occurred to her now.

As he lay there, his position seemed unnatural, and it suggested a new theory. Was he one of them, or, more likely, a prisoner?

Czarina began to be interested. Assuming that the last idea was correct, a motive for seeking the Pits might be inferred. The strangers' object might be to more successfully commit a crime.

Harp Moy was muttering to himself, but his mistress vouchsafed no attention. She glanced toward her discarded torch. It lay behind a rock, and was dying down so that it gave but little light.

The danger of discovery was correspondingly lessened.

Once more the group on the ledge grew compact, and one man knelt beside the prostrate person. He was busy for some time, and then he arose. Again the party moved restlessly, and all except two began to retrace their steps.

Of those who remained, one was the prostrate man; the other, a person who stood over and seemed to address him.

Then he, too, turned away.

The strangers began the ascent of the cliff. They toiled along the narrow way, steadily rising, the light of their torches presenting a picture as marked and weird as before.

Up, up they went, until the top of the cliff was reached. There they hovered for a few moments in conversation; then their backs were turned and they walked away. Only for a brief space were they visible. The torch-light was longer to be seen, but that, too, disappeared, and only darkness was presented to Czarina's view.

The unknown men were gone, but they had left a proof of their visit behind. A human being remained on the ledge, and Czarina did not need to speculate what that meant. Bound hand and foot he would be perfectly helpless, and death by starvation, or a fall into the gulf, would surely follow unless he was rescued.

His enemies did not intend that he should be rescued; they had brought him to a place where help was not likely to reach him, and their own motive was not to be misconstrued.

Czarina shivered. There was a refinement of cruelty about their place far worse than prompt death would have been.

Left to his fate, the miserable wretch would hope and suffer for awhile; but as the last hope vanished, he would welcome the last pang of starvation or, losing his mind, end all by a mad plunge over the ledge.

That much he could do, but escape, unaided, was out of the question.

The girl turned to her servant.

"Rise, Harp Moy," she directed, "and follow me!"

"Be the spirits gone-ee?" he asked, waveringly.

"Don't be absurd!"

Czarina lifted the torch. It had nearly died out, but she began to swing it briskly in the air, and a blaze finally started again.

She moved on.

"Not that wayee!—not that wayee!" cried Moy.

"Foolish boy!" exclaimed Czarina, "will you never cease your idle talk? Follow me, and have no fear."

Harp Moy followed. His courage did not mend, and the dim suspicion in his mind that Czarina was in league with the "demons" of the Pits did not put him at ease; but as he dared not be left behind, he followed where she led.

She went on bravely, one hand grasping the revolver which now seemed such a good and useful friend, but her steps were soon stopped by the eastern side of the gulf. On the opposite side the unknown man lay upon the ledge.

Probably her torch was visible to him, but she could not even locate his whereabouts.

There was only one thing to do—to follow the side of the gulf until she could cross—and she went ahead with her trembling ally at her heels.

She was by no means full of confidence. She did not know how far the men had gone—perhaps she would run upon them and be discovered. She shivered at the thought.

Even that could not stop her. She pressed forward over the barren ground, avoiding each dangerous crevice and manifesting a resolute perseverance admirable in one of her sex.

The end of the gulf was at last reached. She turned to meet the next stage of her venture.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MAN ON THE LEDGE.

HARP MOY crept forward timidly, and the light of the torch, falling on his yellow face, showed it drawn up and wrinkled by his fears.

"We are gloing light toward the spirits," he dolorously observed.

"What spirits?"

"Lem who clarried the torches."

"They were men, stupid!"

"Well, dley wentee that way."

"I know it."

"Be me gloing that way?"

"Yes."

Harp Moy upraised both hands.

"Oh! oh!" he lamented, in a loud voice.

Czarina turned upon him angrily.

"Be silent, sir, or you will repent it!" she ordered.

"I repentee now."

"Do you like this place?"

"No; dlose men will catchee us."

"Listen to me, Moy. Did you ever know me to speak falsely to you?"

"N-no, missee!"

"Well, then, I declare to you that unless you cease your whining, and, above all, your loud cries, I will leave you behind, and all alone, in this wretched place. Now, will you go on and do your best, keeping wisely silent?"

Harp Moy put out his hands imploringly.

"Don't leave me!" he whined. "Me goee whereever you sayee."

"Then follow in silence."

Czarina spoke with firm composure she was far from feeling. She had determined to rescue the man on the ledge, but, even if other persons kept away, it would be no small task to descend the cliff they had gone down so slowly.

There was no longer any trouble about reaching the starting-point. The way was smooth and solid, and the line of the cliff guided them. The only trouble was to find the spot where the men had gone down, and careful search revealed that. It was a narrow inclined plane which led down the face of the cliff, and the prospect was so dismal that Czarina lost courage.

A misstep on that slender ladder would be fatal—the black gulf seemed yawning for its prey.

Czarina stood still and fought down her fears; then she turned to Harp Moy.

"Our way is down there. Follow, again!"

"Oh! oh! I clant goee there!" the Chinaman cried, aghast.

"Don't you see the ledge?"

"Yes, me slee it."

"Can't you go where I can?"

"I shall flail from dle rockees—no glo down. No, no, no!"

He chattered out the words in great trepidation, and then lay down flat on the ledge and buried his face in his hands.

Czarina looked at him in contempt which was not unminged with despair. Weak as he was, his presence had given her a measure of reliance, nominal rather than well-founded, and his revolt deprived her of what little help she had. Only for a moment did she allow her natural feelings to rule her; she aroused, and all the innate firmness of her nature came to her aid.

With a set face she turned to the path down the cliff. The men had gone there—she could, and would, do the same.

The descent was begun.

She dared not look to the left, where yawned the black gulf, but, keeping her gaze constantly on the path, she went slowly down, planting her feet with great care and pressing close to the cliff.

The way seemed thrice as long as when she had watched the men, but she persevered. The path widened at last, and she saw the ledge.

She swung the flickering torch; the blazes sprung up again; he looked ahead and saw the form of a man recumbent on the level rock.

He was motionless, and as no words passed his lips she decided that he must be dead or insensible. She took another step and saw that he was bound and gagged. She was agitated, but she knew what to do. She laid down the torch and drew a knife she carried. It was a fanciful affair, but its edge was keen.

With a trembling hand she drew it across the cords which bound the unknown. Her strength seemed nearly gone, but the very proof of her weakness aroused her to greater efforts. She drew the knife with a firmer hand, and, one after another, his bonds fell away.

Only the gag remained, and she was spared the trouble of removing that. The man had remained passive, but his own hands suddenly moved, went to his mouth and grasped the gag.

Czarina had recoiled in sudden confusion, and she stood still while the man arose.

"Miss King," he said, in a clear voice, "I owe you thanks. Believe me, I am as grateful as a man can be when his life is saved!"

That voice! It was strangely familiar, but at that moment she did not recognize the speaker. He picked up the torch; swung it to increase the blaze; the light flared up again and fell plainly on his face.

Again Czarina started back. She stood upon the lonely ledge with Saddle-Chief Kit!

He bowed with noticeable grace.

"Miss King," he continued, "words are weak, but if the tribute of any one man is of avail, let me say that you are a heroine!"

"I did not know it was you," she faltered.

"I trust the fact would not have kept you away had you known it?"

"It was on a deed of mercy."

"Your work was well done."

"At such a time all personal considerations are out of the question."

"True."

"Consequently, I am glad I saved you."

"I share your pleasure."

"Still, I did not know it was you."

Miss King was not calm, but, however poorly she might express herself, her ruling passions were predominant. She was determined that he should understand she had done what she had out of motives purely Samaritan-like, not from devotion to him.

"I was painfully conscious it was I," answered Kit, practically. "By the way, where are my enemies?"

"Gone!"

"Where?"

"That I don't know."

"Um! And how happened *you* to be near?"

Czarina hesitated; this was a question for which she had not prepared herself.

"I saw them leave you here," she evasively replied.

"Where were you? if I may ask."

"I was near."

She answered laconically and turned away.

"I comprehend," observed Kit, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Well, Miss King, I owe you my life."

"Did those men really intend to kill you?"

"Rather! I was left helpless here, with the choice of starving or deliberately rolling over the cliff."

"Why was it done?"

"Hatred!"

"Were they men you knew?"

"I knew the leader; you know him, too. His name is Dyckman Harrington!"

"You and he seem to be bitter enemies."

"I suspect that we shall be from this time on," calmly replied the Prairie Centaur. "I am built for a forgiving man, but this event goes beyond my build. Dike Harrington and his gang pounced upon me near the village, overpowered me by force of numbers, brought me here and left me to die like a dog. The good Book sayeth, 'Forgive your enemies!' but it likewise puts a veto on such high-jinks as Dyckman's little game. I really can't forgive him, and it is possible we may have a set-to at some subsequent date—it really is, Miss King."

"I cannot blame you."

"I should hope not. As to Harrington, do you know *why* he hates me?"

"No."

"Because I helped you when your horse ran away. He covets your undivided good will."

"The weak-minded villain!" exclaimed Czarina, bitterly. "Does he not know I hate all men?"

"He wants an exception made in his case."

"There are *no* exceptions!"

"He can't realize it."

"Must I publish the fact to all the world? Must I every day declare that I am the friend of *no* man?"

"Men are weak, Miss King; weak and obstinate. When you combine the two qualities, you get a bad compound. I hate to confess it, but that's the way."

"This is not to the point," responded Czarina. "The chance is now offered you to leave here. I presume you are ready to go."

"My feelings run that way, I confess. Yes, it's best to go, for the gulf right at our side is not a pleasant companion. Allow me to aid you."

Czarina had turned the path on the cliff, and their position had brought forth the request, but she made a negative gesture.

"Merely follow me; I will take care of myself. I advise you to use great care; the way is rough, treacherous and difficult."

Kit was very much of the opinion that he could follow where she led, but he omitted comments and did not repeat his offer of assistance. As the path was so narrow that they had to go in single file, he meekly accepted a subordinate position and followed where she led.

During the ascent he had time to think, and great was his curiosity to know how Czarina happened to be at that place. From what he had been told he believed that it was a thing almost unheard of for men to penetrate so far into the Pits, while as for the fairer sex, it was said that no one at Si Gotch had ever gone ten rods into the trackless, forbidding area.

What, then, had brought Czarina there at night?

CHAPTER XIX.

"PRIDE GOETH BEFORE A FALL!"

PATIENT and careful labor took the adventurers to the top of the cliff. Harp Moy was still there, groveling on the ledge with his face buried in his hands and groaning dolorously; but he started up as the light fell upon his vision. Then he dropped upon his knees with uplifted hands.

"Don't touchee me!" he wailed. "I'll goee home light away, Mister Glostee! Plity a poor Chinaman!"

"Silence, you absurd creature!" commanded Czarina, her face flushing with anger. "Don't speak another word; you have tired my patience out utterly."

"Your John Chinese, I see," observed Kit. "Why didn't you send him to the ledge in your place?"

"Because he is a coward."

"That so? Say the word, Miss King, and I'll take him in hand. The only way to subdue cowardice and natural rascality is to lick it out. Spare the rod and spoil the Chinaman! It's plain, Harp Moy, that you were never properly chastised when a youth."

The Celestial heard in a sort of stupor. He was too much frightened to know whether Kit was a human being or one of the "demons" which troubled him so much. He stood still and said nothing.

"Si Gotch lies yonder," announced Czarina, pointing to the southwest. "Let us go at once!"

"May I offer my arm?" Kit asked.

"I need no help, thank you."

Kit nodded good-humoredly. He had seen something of the Pits when he was brought along as a prisoner, and had an idea that Czarina would yet be glad to accept help. Right there she made a mistake. She had abandoned the way by which she and Harp Moy had entered—a way known to her—and started upon one of which she had no knowledge.

The Prairie Centaur kept near her and talked pleasantly, but did not make himself officious. Now and then a crevice made their progress difficult and dangerous, but he tranquilly allowed her to conquer it alone.

Harp Moy followed much as a forlorn, wearied dog would follow its master.

Several minutes passed, and then Kit spoke practically.

"I hope," he remarked, "that you have a spare torch along."

"We have not," Czarina replied.

"We shall need one."

The girl started and looked quickly at the light which she had allowed Kit to carry. Then a look of apprehension crossed her face. The torch was burned well down, and a perceptible decrease in the light indicated that it was dying out.

"Can't you move it and increase the blaze?" she inquired.

"Yes; but would it be prudent? We're not yet out of the Pits, and the torch burns low. I've heard it said that wood is as scarce here as hen's teeth, and I don't see a stick, myself, by the way. What if we get left in the dark?"

"We could not find our way out!"

"And we might find our way into a chasm."

"This is alarming!"

Czarina's proud self-reliance had received a shock. The danger of being left in the dark in the Pits was startling. An attempt to go forward without any light might lead to a fatal casualty, and even if they managed to keep in motion, they might wander at random and never get out. All depended upon keeping the light, for if they were forced to remain in the Pits until morning, all Si Gotch was likely to know the fact.

"What can we do?" she added, faintly.

"I would suggest that if you accept my aid we can go on much faster."

There was a moment's inward struggle, but, plainly, it was well to choose the least of two evils. She chose the least, and took Kit's arm.

The result was soon apparent. He was as quick and sure-footed as a mountain sheep, and chasms around which she would have been obliged to pass were now crossed with ease. His boldness approached recklessness, but the result is the verdict of each venture in life, and, with him, the result was success. Every moment Czarina's confidence in herself received a shock.

She might despise the male portion of mankind, but it was being made clear to her that, in emergencies, she was fit only to be a "clinging vine"—to use the old simile—and that Jameson was quite capable of acting the part of the sturdy oak.

His manner was irreproachable. He gave his help boldly and skillfully, but his conduct never approached familiarity. If they had been the nearest acquaintances, meeting under ordinary circumstances, he could not have been more respectful and dignified.

Once or twice Czarina remembered the unlucky words let drop by the Reverend Tyrington Perham, to the effect that Kit was a suitor for her hand, but the Centaur, himself, conveyed no suggestion of the fact.

The journey was being well conducted, but one grim fact constantly looked them in the face.

The torch was growing dangerously short and dim!

As it burned down it showed an increased inclination to go out, compelling Kit to swing it about, but that only consumed it the faster. Neither knew how much further they had to go, and the time was near at hand when the light would utterly fail. Both looked for a stick by the way which would aid them, but the Bottomless Pits region was true to its reputation—it presented no wood.

The climax came when Czarina stepped into a crevice and nearly fell. Kit's strong arm saved her, but a sharp pain remained in her ankle. She had sprained it, and an effort to walk show-

ed her in no condition for it. She limped, and every effort gave her pain.

"Fate is against us!" she exclaimed, bitterly.

"If you are not able to walk I will return to Si Gotch, improvise a contrivance upon which Harp Moy and I can carry you—"

"I shall walk!" she declared. "I am not helpless, and I will not yield."

This was worthy of admiration, and Kit was always ready to admire courage, but it did not help them out of their dilemma. They went on while Czarina struggled with the pain and the torch burned lower, and the way did not improve. Kit felt that they must be nearing the limit of the Pits area, but the walls of rock prevented any definite analysis of the situation.

Czarina suddenly paused and sat down upon a rock.

"You may leave me!" she calmly said.

"Leave you?"

"Yes."

"I can't think of it."

"I can go no further, and I have no right to inflict my trouble upon you."

"Miss King, you saved my life to-night. I was helpless; I could not have aided myself; and my enemies had left me where they felt sure no other help would come to me. I should never have got out of it alive. You saved me. Now, do you suppose I would desert you? I should be a brute to do it. No; if one of us stays here all night, we all stay!"

"Don't let sentiment interfere with practical realities."

"Rest assured, I shall not."

Kit spoke grimly, and then looked at her with a slight twinkle in his eyes. It faded, and he quietly added:

"We are not placed so that we can quarrel with fate and stand any chance of getting the best of it. If we get out of the Pits we must use heroic measures, as it were. By taking my arm you get only slight aid, but if you will allow me to support you more fully I will agree to get you home in a short time. What do you say?"

Czarina said nothing. It was a bitter experience to accept such help from a man, and that man one who, according to her own verdict, she hated particularly, but there were two sides to the question. If she refused, daylight might find her still in the Pits, and her absence could not be concealed.

She finally arose.

"I will accept your aid," she said, faintly.

Without a word Kit passed his arm around her waist. Once more they advanced, and his strength and skill relieved her injured ankle surprisingly.

They went in silence. Czarina was busy with her thoughts, and was inclined to magnify what she saw fit to term her humiliation. Kit accepted his triumph generously and did not add to her imaginary troubles, but looking back at Harp Moy, who followed with the basket tightly grasped, the Prairie Centaur was more than ever puzzled to know what had taken Czarina to the Pits that dark night.

He was too prudent to inquire, and no explanation was vouchsafed.

The girl was using her eyes well, and a sudden exclamation from her lips called the attention of both her companions. She pointed, and they saw the level land which surrounded Si Gotch stretching away before them.

They were out of the desolate labyrinth.

Czarina was overjoyed, but she did not scorn Kit's aid even then. It was necessary, and she had lost a measure of her pride. Her greatest desire was to gain the cover of Tyrington Perham's house, and her heart beat lighter when they stood near its walls.

She paused and spoke with unusual kindness:

"We part here, Mr. Jameson, but I am deeply grateful to you for your kindness."

"Pray don't mention it, Miss King. It was nothing compared with what you did for me."

"We will not argue that point, but I have not forgotten the day my horse ran away, I thank you for all your aid; and now I have another favor to ask."

"I shall be glad to hear it," Kit answered.

"Can you keep a secret?"

"Beyond doubt."

"Then keep mine. I am anxious that the events of to-night—of course I refer only to my part—shall never be known. Will you refrain from making mention to any one that you have seen me?"

"I shall be happy to oblige you. No one shall know of the affair from me."

"I feel sure that I can trust you. You have given me such good proofs of your honor that I feel at ease."

Czarina spoke with embarrassment, but she was wholly sincere. When her groundless antipathy to the male part of the human species was left out of consideration she had more than the average of generosity, and her sense of justice compelled her to make the acknowledgment.

"Believe me, Miss King, you make no error," Kit gravely replied. "Dyckman Harrington will see me again, but he will be left to wonder how I got out of the predicament he left me in; I shall not tell him. Can you answer," the

speaker added, lowering his voice, "for Harp Moy?"

"I can silence him by appealing, not to his honor, but to his fears."

"You are fortunate. I will leave you now."

Czarina had opened the door and was ready to enter. She extended her hand.

"Good-night," she said, simply.

"Good-night!"

Saddle-Chief Kit held her hand for an instant; then he dropped it and turned away.

The adventure was over, but its consequences were not so easily ended. The mystery of the man of the Pits remained, and, Czarina's opposition to the contrary notwithstanding, the acquaintance between her and Kit was on firmer ground.

CHAPTER XX.

A TURN FOR THE WORSE.

It was a week later than the scenes of the preceding chapter, and the Reverend Tyrington Perham sat in his study once more engaged upon a sermon. There was a knock at the door, and he mechanically bade the applicant enter.

Mrs. Granger, the gray-haired housekeeper, appeared.

"I have come on business, sir!" she announced.

The minister looked up in apprehension. Mrs. Granger was a meek woman, usually, but her voice now had a firm ring which gave him a presentiment of trouble to come.

"Dear me! is that so?" he replied.

"Yes, sir; I have come to give warning."

"Give warning?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't comprehend."

"The term is simple enough: I am going to leave your employment."

Mr. Perham looked aghast. Mrs. Granger had long been an inmate of his house, and she was, as he had often declared, a woman out of a thousand. Not to dwell upon her good qualities it may be said briefly that she filled her position admirably.

"Bless me! what am I to understand by that?" he asked.

"Simply that my life has grown unendurable. Twice, during the past ten days, I have entered protest against the conduct of Mrs. Bastion and her daughter, Pansy. Pansy!—it ought to be Tiger-cat!" declared meek Mrs. Granger, viciously. "Sir, I am an old woman, but I never saw the like of that woman and her young vipers!"

"But, Mrs. Granger, they are to stay only a short time."

"When are they going?"

"Well, I—I don't exactly know."

"Mrs. Bastion has boasted that she will be here ten years after I am in my grave."

"That must have been a joke."

"A joke! Possibly it would be a joke if she was to poison me—and I don't think her any too good for it, I can tell you—but I don't appreciate that kind of 'joke.' She has ruled the house ever since she came here, sir; she has lorded it over me and Harp Moy, and has about worried the life out of Miss Czarina. Of course, Mr. Perham, you know your business best, but if you want your new housekeeper to stay, when you get one, I should advise you to send the Bastion tribe about their business."

Meek Mrs. Granger, transformed into an implacable Fate, confronted the minister grimly, determination expressed on every feature.

And the Reverend Tyrington Perham? The wretched man was in mental agony. He was about as comfortable as a fish dangling on a hook, being equally miserable and helpless.

"I beg that you will not leave, Mrs. Granger!" he imploringly responded.

"I am going, sir."

"Why must you?"

"Because I will no longer tolerate the insults of that woman and her brood."

"I have to bear it!"

"You do? You have to bear it?"

Mrs. Graham repeated the words in surprise, and they threw Perham into confusion. He had made a rash confession, and how he was to explain it he did not know. He made a desperate effort.

"I mean that the confusion annoys me, but it is only temporary—only temporary, believe me. Mrs. Bastion will soon go away, and then we shall fall into our old life. I beg that you will not think of leaving."

"Twice, when I thought of leaving, I have complained of—of those persons; and each time you assured me that they would soon go. Now, I am doing more than to think of going—I am about to leave."

"But where can I get another housekeeper?"

"I can't say, sir."

"None is to be had here, I fear."

"Possibly not."

Mrs. Granger did not appear troubled by the fact.

"Really, my dear madam, I think you ought not to leave me in such a predicament."

"Is it my fault?"

"Certainly not."

"I need not make further answer. I shall be ready to go to-night."

"Stop! stop!" cried the miserable minister.

"Give me time. Surely, a week's warning is due me."

Mrs. Granger did not think so, and she said as much, but the discussion ended in a compromise. She agreed to remain three days, and Perham experienced considerable relief, though why he should do so he did not know. It was only a reprieve, and the intervening time would soon pass.

The housekeeper left the room, and her employer arose and began to pace the room excitedly.

"The matter grows worse!" he murmured; "the effrontery of that woman is unpardonable, and I can bear it no longer. Something must be done. She and her children are housed here without expense to them, but she will use no discretion. I foresee that I am only deferring the inevitable by yielding to her, for I suspect that if she was going away now, her vicious propensities would cause her to tell that miserable secret of old to Czarina. It is folly for me to temporize. I will set down my foot at once and be firm with Mrs. Bastion!"

A knock sounded at the door.

"Possibly Harp Moy has come to give warning," thought the unhappy minister. Aloud, he added: "Come in!"

The door opened, and Esther Bastion appeared. Her manner was calm and easy, and she first closed the door, and then nodded to Mr. Perham.

"Howdy, Tyrie?" she serenely saluted.

The time had come for the clergyman to "set down his foot," but Perham stood still, wondering what new trial awaited him, while Esther took a seat, and spread out her abundant skirts.

"Set down, Tyrie," she added, "I want to talk biz."

A faint ray of hope dawned upon the minister, and he passively obeyed.

"How's sarmonin'?" pursued Esther.

"My sermon is not completed, as yet."

"No? Tryin' ter make it extra fine? Old man, you ought ter have your pay raised, you're so conscientious."

"I do not aspire to rob my congregation. They pay all that I can justly ask. Preachers of the Word are constantly speaking against the sin of covetousness and greed, yet many, I regret to say, are as constantly seeking a raise of their salary."

"Dear heart! how he do talk!" quoth Mrs. Bastion, uplifting both hands, and rolling her eyes upward as though anxious to keep them out of reach. "Ef there is a man who can talk pretty, it's you, Tyrie: I noticed that when you used ter come courtin' me!"

"Mrs. Bastion—"

"After me, parson; after me. I ain't through yit. Tyrie, I'd like ter borror twenty dollars."

"Eh?"

"Twenty dollars."

"I don't understand."

"Parson, if your head was a fort, it would be cannon-ball proof. It's thick enough, I vow. Can't you ketch on? I want twenty dollars!"

"From m—?"

"From you!"

"I have no twenty dollars to loan."

"You'll have ter raise it somehow. I want ter borror, an' of course, you'll accommodate me."

"What can you want of it?"

"My David wants ter see a bit o' life about town, an' he ain't got no money. I told him you'd lend it."

"You made a great mistake!" declared Perham, with a burst of courage. "I have heard how your son passes his time in Si Gotch. He associates with the worst men of the place—drunkards and gamblers—and his favorite resorts are the saloons. Do you suppose I, a minister of the Gospel, will loan money which I know will be spent in dissipation and evil company?"

"Tyrie, I s'pose you'll hand over that double-X."

Esther answered implacably and confidently, and Perham's face flushed.

"Indeed, I will not!" he asserted.

"Then I shall borrow of my oldest daughter, the fair Czarina!"

"She has no money to loan."

"She'll hustle around an' git it for her ma."

"Woman, you will drive me mad!"

"Keep your temper, Tyrie."

"Insane, I mean."

"If I do, I shall then deal with Czarina. The sweet child will never see her ma suffer. But, parson, I don't think it'll come ter that. I want twenty dollars; I'll have it, or I'll peach ter Czarina. You ain't fool enough ter have that old secret told."

"Mrs. Bastion, this is complete blackmail."

"I know it, Tyrie."

"Do you know how the law deals with blackmailers, madam?"

"Do you know how to cook an unketched rabbit? My case an' yours won't come ter law—not much. You will cash over the double-X an' keep me mum!"

Perham did not answer; he was in complete despair. Visionary and vacillating as was his

nature he was not beyond asserting himself when hard pressed, and he had endured so much from Esther that he would have taken summary measures to eject her from the house had he only to think of himself; but in the face of all thoughts of resistance arose the secret the woman held, and for Czarina's sake he knew he must continue to endure.

There was a brief silence, and then he drew from a ten-dollar bank-note.

"Take this," he said, gloomily; "it is all I can give. I warn you not to expect more."

Esther made sure of the money and replied:

"We shall expect all we want."

"You will get no more."

"Nonsense, you old innocent! I shall have what my secret is worth."

"Years ago you were paid, and you then promised never even to appear to us."

"That don't count."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MILLSTONE UPON THEIR NECKS.

ESTHER arose as she spoke and walked to the door. She had won a victory, and she made her departure free from ceremony. Without another look at Perham she went out and closed the door behind her.

The minister was left to his thoughts, and miserable they were. Matters had taken a turn for the worse, and he plainly saw that if he still tried to shield Czarina, he would have to submit regularly to blackmail. And for what an object? David Bastion was thoroughly dissipated and degraded, and to give him money was to furnish means for him to continue his evil course.

Truly, Perham was forced to a lamentable depth of misery.

He passed half an hour in thinking, and then there was another knock at the door. In response to his bidding the door was opened and Czarina appeared. The sight of her loved face was pleasant, and he forgot his troubles for awhile and placed a chair for her.

"You are as welcome as flowers in May, my dear," he declared.

"Don't speak hastily. You have not heard why I come, uncle," she answered.

"No. Why did you?"

"It is about Mrs. Bastion!"

"His heart sunk. Would the specter of that woman never cease to haunt him?"

"What about her?" he faintly asked.

"I am afraid I shall give you pain, uncle, but I must speak out. Mrs. Bastion is not a desirable feature of our house-life. At the very start she made herself obnoxious, and the trouble grows greater. When I spoke to you about it, a week ago, you assured me she would not stay long. She is still here."

Perham was painfully conscious of the fact, and he said as much in one word, gloomily uttered:

"Yes."

"Has she stated when she will leave?"

"I—I think not."

"Do you know?"

"No."

"Don't you think she has stayed long enough?"

"Possibly you are right."

"She just boasted to me that she will not go at all."

"She has?"

"Yes."

Guardian and ward looked at each other mutely. He saw that Mrs. Bastion had gone a step further than ever before. He was frightened, and the plainly pictured emotion on his face did not escape Czarina's notice.

"She says," Czarina slowly added, "that you dare not send her away!"

Perham's hands dropped nervously by his side.

"Mrs. Bastion is a great joker," he weakly replied.

"Is that all?"

"What more is there?"

"She is an evil genius!" Czarina firmly retorted. "Since coming here she has devoted about all her time to making mischief. She has interfered with and insulted us all. Mrs. Granger is angry and will leave us. Harp Moy is in despair and almost wholly useless as a laborer. I, too, have cause to complain."

The minister sighed deeply.

"What has she done to you?"

"She has interfered with my work; she has been rude and impudent to me, or, if the fancy struck her, loving to a fulsome degree. Ugh! fancy such a woman professing love for one!"

Czarina shivered, and Perham covered his face with his hands. He knew how Esther would explain her so-called affection, if explained at all.

"This may seem to you small grounds for complaint—though, if you knew just how offensive she has been you would not wonder—but there is more. You will remember that you gave me some jewels on my eighteenth birthday—in brief, ear-rings and a pin."

"Yes."

"A few minutes ago I entered the parlor where Pansy Bastion lay lolling on the sofa. A certain glimmer attracted my attention; I

looked and saw that she was wearing my jewels. I asked where she got them; she replied, from her mother. I asked for them; she told me to go to her mother."

Czarina paused and the color mounted to her cheeks. Tyrington Perham sighed quivering.

"I trust," the girl added, "that I am not given to violent passion, but on this occasion I found a way to compel obedience. I was angry to a degree you would not think me capable of, perhaps, and I confronted the Bastion offspring with five words:

"Give me back my jewels!"

The speaker laughed lightly.

"I don't know what there was in my manner, but I frightened Pansy out of her wits. Despite her bold assertion that she would not give up the jewels, she *did* give them up quickly. Her hands flew to her ears and out came the rings, and the pin was not far behind. Her cheeks were pale behind the freckles, and her hands trembled."

"Well, having frightened her, I sought Mrs. Bastion. Do you suppose I scored another victory? I did not. This is about the way conversation ran:

"Mrs. Bastion, did you give my jewels to Pansy?"

"Yes."

"Where did you get them?"

"In your room."

"What right had you in my room?"

"I generally go where I please."

"You will *not* go where you please in this house!"

"How'll you help it?"

"If I know of your entering my room again," said I, "I will complain to my guardian, and you will have to leave the parsonage."

"Mrs. Bastion placed her arms akimbo and looked at me impudently."

"Neither you nor the parson can make me leave," she declared. "I won't go for him!"

"What if I see fit to have you arrested for taking my jewels? I asked. 'Your act was theft!'"

"If I steal the boots off his feet, the parson hadn't dare have me arrested," retorted Mrs. Bastion.

"You shall see that he will send you away at once," I answered.

"Try, and see!" she exclaimed. "Let me tell you, young woman, that I am not in this house to be run over. I know my rights, and I'll have them. As for being sent away, Tyrington Perham hadn't dare to send me!"

"Such, uncle, was our conversation, and now you have the report."

Yes, Tyrington Perham had the report, but he would very much rather have been without it. He saw at a glance that there was no way to avoid the question forced upon him. It would be folly to talk of jests in connection with Mrs. Bastion, when she had appropriated Czarina's jewelry and boasted that the master of the house dared not send her away.

The wretched woman had gone a step further than before, and it would be useless to try to blind Czarina longer. The ruling passion with Perham was still to keep that dangerous secret from the girl, and he resolved to do it at all hazards.

But how! That was the question which seemed to tear, vulture-like, at his mind, and he looked so miserable that Czarina could not but notice it.

"Are you ill, uncle?" she asked.

"I am not well, Czarina."

"Perhaps, then, you do not want to talk—"

"On the contrary, I do. Let us have this matter settled. I am deeply pained to hear that you have had such an experience with Mrs. Bastion."

"Oh, as to that, it has done me no harm; but I hope we shall all be free from her soon."

"I hope so, too."

"Don't you think she has forfeited her right to shelter under your roof?"

"Yes."

There was a moment's silence. Czarina waited for Mr. Perham to speak, and he felt that he might as well come to the point. He gathered all his energy, and added:

"Yet, for certain reasons, I fear we shall have to endure her for a while longer. She was right, in a measure, when she said I should be reluctant to send her away—she was right, in a measure. I think it would be injudicious."

"She said you *dared* not send her away."

"I cannot do so without trouble. In a measure, so to speak, I am in her power."

The minister had been feeling his way cautiously, but he realized that, even with that care, he had made a bad choice of words. He pained in alarm.

"In her power?" repeated Czarina, in surprise.

"In a measure, in a measure," stammered the unfortunate man. "Don't mistake my meaning; she has no hold upon me directly, but—a—through a friend."

"And for that friend's sake, you endure her?"

"Yes, yes; exactly."

"May I ask who that friend is?"

"I had rather not tell, Czarina. There are

peculiar circumstances connected with the case, and for the sake of the person whose happiness is at stake, I am anxious to be discreet. Esther Bastion has long since worn out all claims to my forbearance, and I would eject her at once if I could. In the way of this very desirable move stand the secret—the power, I should say—which she holds over my—my friend.”

“And you are sacrificing yourself for him?”

“I am enduring her to save my friend from misery.”

“It is like you—very much like you, uncle. Noble and self-sacrificing to a fault, you are always ready to sink your own claims for another's sake. I respect and honor you for it, uncle, and I am ashamed of my repining. Let us say no more; I will endure Mrs. Bastion and her ways for your sake, and your friend's.”

“If you can, Czarina, it will be best,” Perham eagerly replied.

“I can and will, but those women will not again enter my room unless they pick the lock. The key will be turned and removed at all times.”

“That is right, quite right!” the minister replied. “Protect yourself, my dear, and we shall soon be rid of Mrs. Bastion—I hope!”

“I will do my best.”

Czarina arose as she spoke, and Perham followed her example. As he did so he chanced to look out of the window and see a horseman galloping past.

“There is Mr. Kit Jameson,” he observed. “I have not seen him before for a long while.”

Neither had Czarina; she had not seen him since their night adventure. The injury to her ankle, though not severe, had kept her in the house two days. Neither during that time, nor subsequently, had she heard from or seen Saddle-Chief Kit. She had discreetly questioned Harp Moy, and learned that the Prairie Centaur was not in Si Gotch. She had feared that he might, after all, have fallen victim to his enemies, and the sight of him, alive and well, was a genuine relief.

“I wish he would call,” Perham added; “I like the young man.”

“He is evidently a gentleman.”

With this remark Czarina moved to the door. The minister stopped her to request that she would not betray to Mrs. Bastion by any unguarded speech what he had said, and then she left the study and descended to the lower part of the house.

She met Esther in the hall.

“I hope,” said the woman, maliciously, “you’ve got a good deal of satisfaction out of your complaint.”

“We will not discuss the question,” responded Czarina, as she passed on.

“No,” was the loud retort; “an’ you’ll find me right here as before, not ter be bossed or browbeat by nobody!”

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TEMPTER'S POINTING FINGER.

HALL PEMBROKE was at work in his shop, and as his muscular arms brought the hammer down on the red-hot iron the sparks flew merrily. He was a noticeable figure as he labored there, his blacksmith's apron giving him increased breadth and his big arms bared to a point above his elbows.

There was a sound of footsteps at the door and three men entered. He looked up and nodded pleasantly.

“Good-morning, Sheriff Quinn—good-morning, gentlemen!” he saluted.

“How are you, Pembroke? Hard at work, eh?”

“As you see, sheriff.”

“You are no drone in the hive, and I'm not sure but you make as much money as the miners.”

“I get all I need.”

“And all from your forge and anvil?”

“Every cent.”

“No time to make a raise in other ways, eh?”

“No.”

Pembroke was giving the finishing touches to a piece of iron, and he did not observe that Sheriff Quinn was eying him sharply. The blacksmith tossed his work aside and looked up.

“Somebody made a raise last night,” observed Quinn.

“How so?”

“Burglars!”

“What! here in Si Gotch?”

“Just so.”

“I hadn't heard of it. Who was the loser?”

“The bank. Somebody thought a dividend was due, I reckon; anyhow, one was made last night. Robbers gained entrance and went through the place.”

Hall Pembroke had sat down on the anvil, and remained with his big arms quietly folded. Quinn did not cease his close scrutiny, but the blacksmith met his gaze calmly.

“I'm sorry of that. Si Gotch is a young place, and the bank is younger still. A blow at this stage is pretty tough. I hope the loss was not heavy?”

“It wasn't. Most of the valuables were in a safe which was not molested; but two thousand dollars in hard cash went off. The bank was holding it for the Yellow Bear Mine folks to

pay off with. But that wasn't all. Bank President Lewis Jerome is not keeping house, just now, his family being away; and his silver was in the bank. That was gobbled, too.”

“What do you mean by his ‘silver’?”

“Silver-plate—sugar-bowl, cake-dish, and so on. Jerome was the only man in Si Gotch to have such vanities of life, and he ain't got 'em now.”

“I'm sorry for him, and what robbers should want of such stuff in this region I don't know. Have you any c'ew, sberiff?”

“Only one.”

“I'm glad you have that.”

The sheriff's gaze grew sharper, and he suddenly extended a sheet of paper to Hall.

“Read that, Pembroke! See what you think of my one c'ew!”

There was writing on the paper. The penmanship was rude, bungling and almost unreadable; the spelling was bad; and the fluid used seemed to be the juice of some wild berry of the mountain. The note was as follows:

“SHERIFF QUINN:—If you want to find the stuff taken from the bank last nite, it may pay you 2 look in Haul Pembroke's shop. Yu had beter look sharp. Perr'aps Haul can ade you, four tha say the hider can find.

“Yours respectabell,

OPEN EYE.”

Difficult as it was to read the ill-written document Hall did not fail to comprehend its meaning. He looked at Quinn with an angry flash in his eyes.

“Why, what does this hint at?” he demanded.

“Just what we want to know. That came to me through the post-office, and you can see what it is driving at. In plain words, Pembroke, the writer would have me believe that you are the robber, and that the stolen stuff is concealed here!”

The blacksmith's face flushed.

“Sheriff, my shop is open to you. Go ahead and search it thoroughly. That precious note is the work of some enemy, and I want you to see, right off, that I keep no stolen goods. I'm not built that way!”

His honest indignation had due effect upon Quinn.

“I believe you, Pembroke; but I suppose we shall have to go through the form of searching.”

“By all means. Go ahead!”

Pembroke made a wide sweep with his hand, and his invitation was not less hearty. Quinn felt that it would be only a mere show to make the search, as he had explained, but his official duty required some move in the case.

There was not much labor in the investigation. Less rubbish had accumulated than might have been seen in an older shop, and in a short time the sheriff had searched everywhere except in one corner where several pieces of broken machinery made a pile.

“Nearly all of that has been there for months,” observed Pembroke, “but I want you to overhaul the whole lot. Don't leave a corner.”

“It's only a ceremony, of course.”

Quinn began tossing the refuse articles to one side and soon uncovered a stout bag.

“What's this?” he asked.

“I don't know; I don't remember the article. Open it!”

Quinn lifted the bag and a metallic clicking followed. It was carefully tied, but he cut the string and looked inside. Then he turned quickly to the blacksmith.

“Hallo! what's all this?” he asked.

Pembroke saw a change in his expression and voice, and moved quickly forward. He, too, looked into the bag, and the gleam of silverware at once caught his attention. A blank look appeared on his face, but the sheriff emptied the bag with one motion.

“There's the missing silver!” he exclaimed. “Every piece is right here!”

He turned to Pembroke, and the men looked each other in the face.

“This is an atom odd,” Quinn added.

“By heavens, it is the work of some enemy!” Hall cried. “I never saw the stuff before, and did not know it was there. It is a plot to injure me!”

“Who should want to do that?”

“Who could, except the real thief?”

“But why should he throw away his booty thus?”

“I don't know; but one thing is certain: I did not know the silver was there, nor have any hand in hiding it. 'Twould be easy enough for an outsider, and that was how it got there. The shop is never fastened; some one came here last night.”

“What enemy have you who would take such a step against you?”

“I don't know.”

“Hello! what's going on here?”

It was a new voice that asked the question, and as the men turned they saw Judah Mardwin. He had entered the shop unseen, and now sauntered carelessly forward, his hands plunged deep into his pockets.

“Aha! so you've been investing, have you, Pem?” he added. “Is this the silverware you told me you was going to buy?”

He picked up one of the dishes.

“What's that?” Quinn asked, quickly.

“Why, Pem said he was going to marry soon, and that he was going to get something of this kind as a present to his wife. I suppose you helped—”

“Man, you lie!” shouted Pembroke, suddenly finding his tongue, and speaking with the force of fury.

“Eh? What?”

“This is stolen ware!” declared Quinn.

A sudden change passed over Mardwin's face; his jovial expression gave place to one of downcast dismay.

“The dickens you say?”

Hall Pembroke was pale with rage, and his expression made Judah recoil.

“I never told you I was going to get anything like this—”

“I believe you are right, Pem; you didn't tell me so. I misunderstood you somehow. Never mind what I said, Quinn; mistakes will occur. I didn't just catch what Pem said, I reckon.”

“I never mentioned anything of the kind to you!” thundered Pembroke, still lashed to fury.

“That's a fact, Pem. Now I think of it, silverware was not referred to. It was—a—was something else.”

He spoke with manifest confusion, and the sheriff looked from him to Pembroke and back again in an uncertain way. Mardwin had all the appearance of a man who had made an unlucky confession, and wished to get out of it, while the blacksmith's anger was, to a casual observer, equally suggestive.

“This is peculiar!” Quinn muttered.

Pembroke had unconsciously picked up his hammer, and his attitude was threatening and ominous. He now leveled the index finger of his free hand at Mardwin.

“Do you want to know who has lied about me?” he demanded, in a thrilling voice. “Do you want to know who has tried to ruin me? There stands the guilty wretch!”

His voice arose to a high pitch, and passion gave him an appearance that alarmed Judah.

“Pem, Pem!” he exclaimed, “what in the world do you mean? You know I wouldn't do you harm for the world.”

“Who sent the lying letter to Quinn?” furiously added the blacksmith. “Who hid the silver under the rubbish-pile? Ay, and who robbed the bank? Man!—devil, rather!—it was you; and it was done to ruin me!”

Hall Pembroke's hand moved to his neck and he tore open his shirt at the collar. Air seemed to fail him; he felt like one suffocating. Then, once more, a red mist swam before him, and in it was a figure, nameless, beyond description, and not of earth; and one of its hands pointed to Judah Mardwin, its lips moved and Hall saw the pantomimic words:

“Kill!—kill!”

The blacksmith raised his heavy hammer.

“Fiend!” he cried, “I will resist fate no longer! I will do as I am commanded, and the result be upon your own head!”

He sprung toward Judah, and the hammer would have done deadly work, but Quinn and his deputies grasped the maddened man and forced him back. The hammer was wrested from his grasp, and that, too, without trouble. A new change had come over him. The red mist—the shadowy Tempter—Judah Mardwin and the officers faded from his view. He saw only a black expanse, and his strength faded as did the other objects he had seen.

Quinn forced him into a chair and he sat there weak and helpless, shaking as though with some mortal complaint.

“Great Scott! what does this mean?” Quinn demanded.

Judah glanced toward the door as though he wished himself well out of the whole affair.

“Pembroke don't seem to be well,” he returned, in a low voice.

“Why should he wish to injure you?”

“I don't know.”

“Ain't you and he friends?”

“Yes.”

“Did he really speak to you about buying silver?”

Judah glanced at Pembroke, but, confident that the latter was incapable of hearing, softly replied:

“I must have misunderstood him.”

“But you thought he said so?”

“No.”

“Carefully, Mardwin! You'll only harm your friend by denying it.”

“I deny it, all the same!” declared Judah. “Don't think to harm Pem through me! The noble fellow is incapable of crime, and I'm bound to stand by him!”

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE ANVIL-SEALED WARNING.

JUDAH was recovering his assurance and his venom. When he saw the hammer upraised in the blacksmith's muscular arm, he had been alarmed, but the cowering, shivering figure in the chair was more like the man he had for weeks taunted and harassed; so he, too, fell back into old ways and proceeded to deftly stab Pembroke in the back, figuratively speaking.

Quinn began to look with less favor upon Pembroke. He had seen the latter and Judah together, and, ignorant that their relations were so peculiar, had arrived at the wrong impression that they were really friends. Now, it looked as though Judah, believing Hall guilty, was trying to shield him after an unlucky chance expression.

The sheriff waited for Hall to recover, and he was not long in doing so. He lifted his head, and, though very pale, was strikingly calm.

"I am the victim of a plot, Quinn," he said.

"How so?"

"Some enemy put the silver in my shop."

"Why should he do that?"

"To make me out the robber, of course."

"And fling away his booty?"

"There was more booty than that miserable plate at stake."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. You say you got that note, signed 'Open Eye,' in the morning's mail?"

"Yes."

"At what time?"

"Nine o'clock."

"It must have been mailed early."

"Yes."

"Who but the real thief could get around to do such prompt work?"

"Granting that the insinuation of the note was correct, the writer, if any honest man, may have seen you secreting the plate."

"When did the bank officials know they had been robbed?"

"At ten o'clock."

"Then how did the writer of that note know of it so early that he could mail that letter as he did?"

The sheriff whistled.

"Zounds! there is something in that!" he agreed.

"No 'honest man' sent you that note; it was not like a man of that caliber. Whoever wrote it knew that the bank had been robbed, and the booty, or a part of it, secreted here. How would an honest man know all this? Even if he saw the bank robbed, would he take this course? Would he not, rather, come openly to you?"

"Unless he had some motive for keeping still."

"What motive could he have?"

"I can't see any."

"One more question. You got the note before the bank people discovered their loss. Did you act upon it?"

"No; I thought it a poor kind of a joke."

"Well, the writer of the note knew of the robbery from one to eight or ten hours before the bank officers did. I will explain why I use such a peculiar term as 'from one to eight or ten hours.' You received the note one hour before the bank discovered its loss; the note was, very likely, mailed before daylight; and if an 'honest man' saw me secreting the silver last night his knowledge goes back several hours—hence, my peculiar expression. Now, is it the way of an 'honest man' to keep the secret of a crime so long, and let the thieves get away with plunder?"

The sheriff stood dumb.

"Even if the 'honest man' saw the plate concealed here during the night, what proof had he that it would be here when the note reached you? None, if he was an honest man, for the robber who concealed it was thereby allowed time to move it to another place."

"Logic!" Quinn muttered.

"The writer of that note was not afraid that it would be removed, for the simple reason that he, and he alone, knew where it was."

"Fact, by gracious!"

"Again, the robbery of the plate was only a small item; the cash taken from the bank overtops it largely. Now, can you tell me how the writing of that note by the alleged 'honest man' would help you to get back the cash? Did he tell you where that was? Not much! Mr. Sheriff, your honest man is, in this case, a myth. The real thief wrote that letter after fixing things here so that he thought I would be caught in the snare!"

Pembroke's voice rung out clearly, and he faced Quinn with a bold, open manner which impressed that gentleman greatly.

"By gracious!" he exclaimed, "I can't say how you would impress a judge in court, but you've got me. There is horse sense in your argument, and though I've found stolen goods on your premises, I won't think the worse of you for it unless I'm obliged to. That's straight!"

"Your judgment, at least, is good; I am innocent."

"It would be absurd to doubt it."

"Will all men say that?"

"Other men ain't sheriff here."

"They may call upon you to arrest me."

"More proof must be given, then."

Pembroke looked scowlingly at the silver.

"What of this accursed stuff?"

"Oh! it goes back to the bank, of course."

"And what of the man who put it there?"

"He must be found."

The blacksmith turned his gaze upon Judah Mardwin. He was again in a normal state of mind, and his ideas worked clearly. He felt

sure that the real thief, and the writer of the note, stood before him in the person of his swarthy rival. With the recovery of his faculties he had lost the ungovernable desire to assail his enemy, and would have shrunk from the risk of touching him in anger; but he was positive as to the source of the cowardly blow, and it was plain that Judah had determined to destroy him at all hazards.

How was he to deal with this relentless foe?

Once, already, he had accused Mardwin, but the words had passed as those of a man in temper. If he accused him again, what proof had he to offer? None! If he did not accuse him, he would be free to work further mischief.

At that moment Hall Pembroke knew that it had come to a clear battle between them. There could be no more half-way measures. One of the two must be crushed, and if cunning and vindictiveness could accomplish the result, Judah would be the victor.

The blacksmith drew his form erect. The natural determination of his nature arose superior to superstition, and he resolved to fight to the bitter end; to give his enemy blow for blow.

"The robber shall be found," he quietly asserted, answering Quinn. "He is a man too mean and dangerous to go abroad among respectable men and women. Yet, we need not go running about the country after professional cracksmen; the robber must be looked for in ambush. He is a coward—his blow at me proves that—and he will be in his burrow. We must look there."

The speaker shot a sidelong glance at Judah, but that man's audacity was not to be crushed.

"I hope, Quinn, that you will spare no expense or time in this matter, and I shall be glad to help you. I am not a busy person, and nothing will please me more than to help you for Pembroke's sake."

"Your devotion is well known, Mardwin," replied the blacksmith, in slow, measured tones.

"I'm not one to desert a friend," affirmed Judah.

"Your ways are well known."

"Well, I'm off!" added Quinn. "I'll take the plate back to the bank, and then see if our robber has left any clew."

"Can't I help you?" asked Mardwin.

"Not now."

"I'll walk over-street with you."

The sheriff replaced the silver in the bag, said a few friendly words to Pembroke, and went out, followed by his deputies and Judah. Pembroke, left alone, mechanically picked up his fallen hammer, and, resting it upon the anvil, allowed his thoughts full sway. That they were not of a pleasant nature was indicated by the scowl upon his face, but he stood motionless until the sound of footsteps aroused him.

He looked up—Mardwin was back, cool, smiling and full of impudent unconcern.

"Well, you got out of that well, didn't you, Pem?" he asked, gayly.

"Out of what?" simply asked Hall.

"Your fix."

"Explain yourself, sir. Your words would seem to convey an intimation that I was guilty."

"Pem, the sheriff is a blessed innocent, and, for your sake, I'm glad he is. There are times, old boy, when the blinder a man is, the better 'tis."

"I comprehend. The argument which satisfied Quinn has not influenced you. I did not expect it would."

Pembroke leaned heavily upon his hammer, and looking his rival straight in the eyes, added:

"It would be hard to change your opinion, for you know too much about it. You and the thief are one and the same person."

"Now, Pem, that's a trifle rough for a joke!" cried Judah, in his most buoyant way.

"It is no joke, and you know it. You robbed the bank; you placed a portion of the plunder in my shop; you wrote the note to Quinn; and it was your purpose to put me irrevocably in the clutches of the law. Judah Mardwin, you are a scoundrel, but your devilish malignance may yet follow me too far. I have borne all I can—don't tempt me any more. Beware!"

"Why, see here, Pem—you talk strangely to a friend."

Pembroke brought the hammer down forcibly on the anvil.

"A friend!" he echoed, bitterly. "So is a rattlesnake a friend to its prey. Man, take warning! Pause in time. You have harassed me beyond endurance: see to it you do not carry this too far for your own good!"

The subdued vehemence of his manner was not to be mistaken, but Mardwin persisted in his mocking malice.

"You go on terribly, Pem. One would actually think you bore me ill will. I hope you don't blame me because Jessie Hollis shows a preference for my society—"

Again the hammer rung on the anvil.

"Stop!" ordered the blacksmith, authoritatively. "Don't dare to drag her name into this conversation. You have too often used its sneeringly, and I will endure it no longer. Man, man, can't you see that you are rushing headlong to your fate?" Pembroke solemnly added.

"My fate?"

"Your fate!"

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that you have gone as far as you can safely go. How I have struggled with myself to avoid the decree of fate you will never know, but the restraining hands are weakening. What is to be, will be, and it is no credit to me to let you go on and ruin me, and all I regard highly, before I strike the final blow."

"This looks like a threat," muttered Mardwin, uneasily.

"It is a solemn warning. See to it that you listen. If you should see the red mist as I have, if you should see the Tempter, and see his lips utter that command, you would not rush upon your fate. Be warned in time!"

"Don't try to frighten me, Pembroke."

"I am trying to save you—and myself. But it rests with you, for my struggle is about over; I shall resist but a little longer. Be warned, Judah Mardwin; be warned! Keep away from me, or I shall yet do you mischief!"

Once more the hammer rung upon the anvil; then Pembroke tossed the implement away and pointed to the door.

"Go!" he added, in a deep voice.

"I will, Pem," Judah replied, trying to assume his old manner, "and I'll stay until you're in better humor. I am really disgusted with your exhibition of groundless temper."

With these words he walked sulkily from the shop.

CHAPTER XXIV.

KIT GETS IMPORTANT NEWS.

It will be remembered that Tyrington Perham and Czarina saw Saddle-Chief Kit enter Si Gotch after having been invisible there for a week. The Prairie Centaur had not reached the town without an experience worth relating.

He had come by the eastern trail, mounted upon Samson and riding like a master of the art. The effete men of the great cities have a certain style of riding—which they term the "gentleman's" way—which is no more graceful than the flops of a jumping-jack. That way satisfies them, and as it is too absurd to be worthy of much attention, it may be allowed to rest, but it bears about the same relation to true riding as the flight of a barn-yard fowl does to the soaring of an eagle.

The men of the Western prairies have the only correct form of riding, and it is a sight to warm one's blood to see them on their spirited horses, sitting like a part of the animal, grace and ease in every motion and perfection in every detail.

Kit Jameson had not acquired his sobriquet without good cause, and as he rode toward Si Gotch he was a figure to attract attention. He and Samson seemed at their best, and that was saying a good deal.

The Centaur's eyesight was good, and he suddenly checked Samson and directed his gaze to a point toward the north. A moment he hesitated; then he sprung from Sampson's back and began moving among the rocks in a way which indicated a desire to avoid notice.

His purpose soon became clear. After moving about in a zigzag way he reached a thicket and, parting the leaves, saw two men only a few feet away. They were seated upon a rock engaged in earnest conversation, and unconscious of the fact that any one was near.

He recognized both; they were Dyckman Harrington and David Bastion.

Kit had first discovered them by chance, but, being considerably interested in Harrington, he had determined to know the subject of their conversation. He was, at last, where he could listen, and he proceeded to do so.

Harrington was speaking.

"I've taken an interest in you, Dave," he observed, "and I'll do all I can to help you along, but you need money to figure well in Si Gotch, as I said yesterday."

"I expect some to-day," Bastion answered.

"Been slinging the cards?"

"No."

"Fallen heir to a hoodle?"

"No."

"I don't believe you've been using a pick."

"I ain't," David answered; then he hesitated and added: "Fact is, Dike, I expect some money from the parson."

"Oh! you must be a favorite there."

"He hates me like sin!"

"Then how can you get money from him?"

"I don't mind tellin' you," responded Bastion, with a burst of confidence. "Fact is, I owe it all ter my mother. I couldn't git a red from the old man, but she's got a grip on him."

"A grip?"

"A secret."

"Got Perham in her power, eh?"

"Yes."

"Some crime of his in old times?"

"Not exactly; it is through Czarina. The old lady knows a thing or two about the gal, an' she's usin' Perham for the good of Bastion & Co. Bless you, we wouldn't be tolerated an hour in that house, only the old woman has the parson foul. We went there when hard up, an' my old lady told Perham we was goin' ter stay. We're there now. You never got inter a bigger

menagerie, Dike, in your life. Old lady Bastion is a corker when she winds up her Ebenezer an' sets it a-goin' like a clock, an' that's what she's done now."

"Making things lively, eh?"

"Well, I should remark! Perham is half-crazy. Czarina an' the servants are runnin' to him an' kickin' 'cause my mother rides so rusty, an' he da'ssent say a blessed word. He'd fire us ef he could, but he can't."

"The secret stands in the way, I judge."

"Yes; ef we was ordered out, the old lady would tell it ter Czarina, an' Perham would rather lose his tongue than have the gal know it."

"It concerns Czarina, then?"

"Yes."

"Don't she know about it?"

"No."

"I'd like to hear it," observed Harrington, insinuatingly.

David looked uneasy.

"I only know a part; not enough ter be clear. My old lady is sly, an' she don't let me an' Pansy into her schemes no great. We don't object as long as she does the biz up brown, an' she don't often git left. She's got the parson by the ear, as I said, so he don't dare put us out; an' now she has agreed ter strike him, fur me, fur a double-tener. When I git it, Dike," added the young reprobate, with enthusiasm, "I'll set 'em up in good shape fur the boys."

"That's the talk, Dave; but I can't imagine what the secret is about Czarina."

"The old lady knows."

"I'm interested in Czarina."

"We won't steal her from you, Dike."

"No; but if there is a patent secret on the ways, I'd like to use it to bend Czarina's will. Fact is, she don't like me."

"No; she hates you."

"If I had that secret I'd tame her."

"I'd tell you if I could, but I don't know it. I'll see my old lady about it."

"Possibly I could pay something for it."

David's eyes twinkled greedily.

"I'll see the old lady."

"Say to her that I will pay well for the secret, if it will enable me to humble Czarina. I want to marry her, and I've got a rough row to hoe. Help me in this, Dave, and I'll fill your purse, by Jove! I'll give you a two-X bank-note now, if you'll give me an inkling to the secret!"

Dave Bastion's weak, vicious mind had been a good deal influenced by Harrington, and he was proud of being taken notice of by one who occupied a high position among the disreputable citizens of Si Gotch, but even this did not rise superior to the young man's selfishness and greed.

He could give Dike a very clear idea of the secret, lacking details, but he determined not to speak out without being well paid. He did not believe that honor existed among thieves, and was suspicious that if Harrington secured the "inkling" for twenty dollars it would be the only money paid over.

"I'd jump at the chance ef I could," he returned, "but the fact is I'm wholly at sea; the old woman has kept her tongue still. All samee, I can an' will help you out. I'll see my respected parent an' git her secret ef I can."

"When?"

"Right off."

"Will you then come to the saloon?"

"Yes."

"Then let's go back at once."

Harrington arose briskly, for he was eager to learn the secret which would give him power over Czarina, and the two men walked away.

Saddle-Chief Kit looked after them and nodded sharply.

"A pretty scheme!" he commented. "A very pretty scheme, by George! and I am interested. Czarina King is a fine girl, and Tyrington Perham is a man who deserves better luck than to have such a gang quartered upon him. And he dares not send them away! What he needs is a man who isn't too old to fire 'em out, neck and heels!"

The speaker held out one arm and run the other hand over it investigatively.

"It wouldn't surprise me if I was about the sized man that's needed in this case!" he added, grimly.

Harrington and Bastion had disappeared in the bushes, and Kit turned back toward his horse.

"I reckon I'll call on the preacher. He isn't a man of much sand, I judge, and his calling would prevent his taking the Bastions by the scruff of the neck and shaking them out of their boots. Now, I haven't any such compunctions, and I allow that I'll volunteer to do some good, old-fashioned flogging for the parson. I'm not going to have any crew like that worrying Czarina—not by a long chalk!"

The Centaur reached his horse, and, after lingering for awhile, mounted and rode slowly into the village. He went at once to the hotel and was soon installed in his former quarters.

Somewhat later he descended to the saloon. Almost the first person he saw upon entering was Dike Harrington, but that person did not see him. Dike was engaged in a warm discussion

with one of his cronies, and saw no one else. Kit sauntered to a position near the men. Unless Dike had heard of his reappearance, that man undoubtedly supposed him dead in the Pits, and the Centaur intended to give him a surprise.

"The gray mustang is the fastest horse in Si Gotch!" declared Dike.

"I'll bet the sorrel can beat him."

"He can't do it!"

"Money talks!" quoth the second man, running his hand into his pocket.

"Right, it does," Dike agreed; "and I'll go you any amount you wish that the gray beats the sorrel. I'll bet—"

"If I were you, I wouldn't bet!"

It was a quiet voice near Dike's elbow that uttered the last words, and the fellow looked quickly around. There stood Saddle-Chief Kit, his hands plunged deep into his pockets, his hat tipped back on his head, and a look of perfect serenity upon his face.

"Betting on horse-races is mighty poor business," added Jameson, in a drawling voice.

Dike Harrington did not reply; he was gazing at Kit in utter dismay. That his rival had escaped death in the Pits he had never suspected; but there he was, alive and well. Dike did not believe in ghosts, and he knew that Kit had come back in the flesh.

It was an alarming discovery for he had not recovered from the fear Kit had compelled him to feel on another memorable occasion. There was the man he had tried to kill, come back again. Had he come back for vengeance?

CHAPTER XXV.

NEMESIS ON THE TRACK.

KIT met Harrington's gaze fully, and the latter was not greatly relieved by the fact that it was not an angry look. The quiet, careless smile on the Centaur's face did not suit Dike.

"I have come back to town, Dyckman," pursued Dick, nonchalantly.

"I—I see you have."

"You don't seem glad to see me."

"I didn't expect you," muttered Harrington.

"No? Where did you think I was?"

Dike had no reply ready.

"As you're a betting man, sport, I'll wager something I can guess just where you think I was. Is it a go?"

Kit threw one leg over the back of a chair which stood in front of him, and, smiling blandly, leaned forward and nodded pleasantly.

"Come, Dyckman, let us settle our account," he supplemented.

Harrington had no desire to settle it; he was a badly frightened man. He had been bold enough when he had Kit bound and helpless on the ledge of the cliff, and had paused to taunt him, while the other ruffians crept up the slender path; but the plotter was afraid of the man who had come back from the Pits, strong, confident and cool.

"I say, partner"—to Dike's friend—"has our good friend lost his tongue?" Kit asked.

The other man saw that there was something out of joint somewhere and shook his head.

"None o' my funeral!" he discreetly observed.

"Humph! Well, I shall have to give up the bet, I reckon; but there is another thing which may interest Harrington and the gang. Some days ago, Dike gently whispered that I was a road-agent, bank-robber, horse-thief, chicken-magnetizer, watch-irregular and a few other things, and referred to John P. Hicksit, Denver detective, for proof. I agreed to pay for sending a telegram to John P., and the answer is just in, delay being caused by the fact that J. P. was out. Barkeeper, will you read J.'s telegram?"

The guardian of the liquids produced a paper and read it in a loud voice as follows:

"To Whom It May Concern:—In reply to question from Si Gotch would say that I have known Kit Jameson for ten years, and I hereby certify that no one ever had the nerve to charge crime against him before. He is a square man from heel to scalp, and my personal friend. I vouch for him."

JOHN P. HICKSIT, Detective.

The reader's voice died away, and the Centaur, who had carelessly lighted a cigar, blew a wreath of smoke upward, and during a striking silence, watched it critically.

"John P. has spoken!" he then remarked, as indifferently as though he was not connected with the matter.

"No sencerble man ever doubted ye," declared a voice from the crowd.

"That's a fact," added Con Byrd, who had just entered the saloon. "If I was blind in one eye, an' halt an' lame in t'other, I could see that Kit is a good 'un. An honest man is the noblest work o' art. Pardners, some zigzag streak o' wind, decapitated from a devastation-charged skirmish line o' concentrated cyclone, has blowed a diminutive piece o' bullion inter my trowsers pocket. It bears the pictur' of a charmin' female on the larboard side, an' though female charms hev an agreeable effect on my savage mind, I propose that we all sally up ter the bar whar our friend yender dispensations liquid mysteries, an' drink, imbibe, swaller, guzzle, pour down, tip inter an' precipitate down our

throats some w-h-i-s-k-y, whisky. Thar is dust in my throat. It ought ter come out, an' it shall come out, by Ajax!"

Con's long speech had reduced his voice to a faint, husky whisper, but he smote the bar heavily with his fist, and nearly all the crowd responded to his invitation.

He urged no one, and Kit and Dike were left together.

"Harrington," observed the Centaur, "walking is good on the road from Si Gotch. If I were you I'd get out of town."

"I sha'n't go for you!" muttered Dike, doggedly.

"I'd a bit rather you wouldn't. I want you to stay here and let me chew you up at my leisure. I shall take great pleasure in the job, and as you owe me a favor, of course you'll stand up and take it."

"I shall submit to no outrage from you."

"No?"

"No, sir."

"Don't want to camp on a ledge in the Pits, eh?"

"They say the devil helps his own, and I see you got out."

"I got out, sure."

"Have you any objection to saying how?"

"I might have, possibly, but that's not to the point. You tried to kill me. What have you to say against my setting Sheriff Quinn upon you, with an order of arrest?"

"Ain't we capable of settling our own quarrels?"

"Dyckman, you're a brick. We are, and we will. What time and place better than this? We both carry revolvers—let's settle the thing right off!"

Harrington changed color.

"I'll meet you outside Si Gotch to-morrow, at sunrise," he replied.

"Want to ring in your heelers again?"

"I shall bring only my second."

"A regular duel, is it?"

"Yes."

"I'd much rather have it over at once, for one of us would save a night's board, which would please his heirs, do you see?"

"I refuse to fight now."

"You do, do you? Harrington, I doubt you! You haven't the frank, open look I like to see on a man's face when he's arranging such an affair—though, to be sure, a decent look upon your face would be out of place. I doubt you! You don't intend to meet me as you agree, and I know it!"

"Don't you worry!" answered Dike, trying to assume a swagger. "I'll be around to settle you permanently."

"It would give the boys lots of fun if we had it out right here."

"I decline to fight, now."

"Humph! How I could unsettle your plans if I waded in! There's nothing to prevent, and there would be a boss skirmish right away. A fight may be forced upon a man, and as your life is forfeit to me, I would touch you up a bit were it not that I have other plans. It would be poor satisfaction to me to end it so quick. Do you know why?"

Dike moved uneasily.

"No."

"I want to haunt you!"

"Haunt me?"

"That's the size of it. I have you all fixed, and you can't get away from me. Let us suppose you try to shoot me unawares. It won't work, for not only am I quick on the shoot, but I have men here who will dog you wherever you go. If you try to shoot me, they will shoot first; if you try to run away, they will see that you don't go. In brief, there will at all times be a silent, invisible avenger on your track. Pleasant, isn't it?"

"I don't believe you!" muttered Dike.

"Don't believe what?"

"That you have such men."

"Try any games and see! I pledge you my word that I will not watch you between now and the dawn of another day. At any time you see fit, try to leave town—even if you intend to return after riding a mile. I will not molest you, but I'll bet money you can't get off. Why, man, you are as securely jailed already as though four stone walls shut you in!"

Kit spoke in a deep, solemn voice, and Dike felt a chill creep over him. Coward that he was at heart he held the Prairie Centaur in great awe, and, somehow, it seemed worse to be in his power in such a mysterious way than if he was followed by the Centaur, himself.

At this moment Con Byrd approached and spoke to Kit, and the two went to one side.

Harrington jumped to the conclusion that Con was the man selected to dog him, and he determined to make a prompt move. He had plenty of followers in Si Gotch, but he lacked the courage to rally them; and it occurred to him that if he could get rid of his enemies, he would be able to regain his lost ground.

He decided to get out of Si Gotch, hide in the hills until midnight, and then return secretly and see his friends.

Knowing the value of time he left the saloon at once. As he reached the door he saw a strange horse tied near at hand, and as he lacked such

a useful animal, he was seized with a sudden impulse to appropriate it.

This would not be new business to him, though it was a step in crime he had never ventured upon in Si Gotch.

He laid his hand upon the animal and began to untie him, but a man suddenly turned the corner of the hotel with a drawn revolver in his hand.

"I wouldn't do it, ef I see you, stranger!" the unknown observed. "The owner o' that hoss may want him, hisself. Hoss-stealin' ain't pop'lar here, an' I'd hand ye over ter justice, only I'm bound by promise ter Saddle-Chief Kit ter let ye alone unless you try ter skip!"

The words fell upon Harrington's ears with unpleasant force, and he did not attempt any answer. Here, at the first step, he found Kit Jameson's man. Silently he turned and walked away.

He expected the unknown to follow, but he did not. On the contrary, he turned and entered the saloon.

Dike could hardly believe his good fortune, and he moved on swiftly. After all, he would get the start of his enemies, he thought, and it was only a few steps to the wild hills where there were hundreds of coverts fit for a fugitive. His heart grew lighter as he neared the edge of the village, but, all at once, a six-foot giant in a red shirt and a weapon-laden belt appeared in his path.

"This is the end o' the beat, old man!" remarked the giant, carelessly. "Kit Jameson's orders are ter keep you inside the camp, an' I'm bound ter do it. Turn back!"

Harrington's heart sunk. Already Kit's statements were being verified, and he was literally a prisoner. The giant looked big enough to crush him, and as he advanced, Dike turned back.

CHAPTER XXVI.

KIT BECOMES A "FIGHTING PARTNER."

SOMEWHAT later the same day Harp May brought word to the Reverend Mr. Perham, as the latter sat in his study, that Kit Jameson had called to see him, and the visitor was at once admitted.

Perham greeted him cordially.

"You are welcome, very welcome, sir!" he declared.

"Thank you. I thought I'd drop in a few minutes."

"You did quite right, I have not seen you lately."

"I've been out of town," Kit explained.

"Away on business, I suppose. My business keeps me here," and Perham sighed.

"You have the advantage of me in one respect; you have a pleasant home," remarked the Centaur.

"Ye-es; it has been pleasant."

"I understand you have friends visiting here now."

"Ahem! We have company," Perham amended.

"It must be pleasant for you."

"Well, as to that, I was contented when only Czarina was here."

"Mr. Perham, why don't you come out boldly and say that the Bastions are a pernicious millstone upon your neck?" Kit bluntly asked.

"Eh? What? How is that, sir?" asked the minister, in confusion.

"I happen to know that you don't love the Bastion tribe, and would dispense with them without a tear, if they would only pack their trunks and skedaddle."

"Indeed, sir, I cannot imagine how you learned that," answered Perham, uneasily.

"I had it from David Bastion's lips."

Perham's face clouded.

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"Never exchanged a word with him in my life, but a critical analysis of the fellow leads me to believe I don't hanker to class him as my friend. I resign all claims in favor of the hangman, who is bound to get him in the end."

"Do you know of any crime he has committed?" was the eager inquiry.

"None, except blackmailing you."

Perham's face flushed.

"How did you know that?"

"From Bastion's own lips. Parson, if I was you I'd pitch that Bastion crew into the gutter—I would, by St. George and the other chap!"

The minister looked anxiously at Kit, and a ray of hope struggled into his mind. He had been painfully conscious that he, with his simple, anti-practical mind, was not the person to cope with Esther Bastion. A stronger intellect and, perhaps, stronger mind was needed; and as he looked at the bold, manly Centaur a new idea occurred to him. He had liked Kit from the start; he had already had a proof of his good will; and every instinct of the elder man's nature told him that the visitor was one to do good service in a cause he espoused, and to wear his honors modestly and with good judgment.

He made a sudden resolution.

"I am an old man, Mr. Jameson," he answered.

"Should you need help I am at your service."

"Then you don't like the Bastions?"

"I'm not acquainted with them, but ever

since I heard Dave bragging about the grip he claimed to have on you, and how they were using it, I've felt a strong desire to get a hand on them and fire them out."

"Pray tell me what David said."

Kit complied with the request. It was his desire to have a frank understanding, for he had set his heart upon being of service to Perham and Czarina—and thereby winning the esteem of the latter—and he told how he had chanced to overhear the talk between David and Harrington. He had a very clear recollection of their words, and he kept nothing back. The matter was laid before Perham bluntly.

When the story was told Kit settled back in discreet silence, and for awhile not a word was spoken in the room. Perham was thinking, however, and his meditations bore fruit. He at last raised his gaze to his companion's face.

"Mr. Jameson, are you a discreet man?"

"I am, sir."

"I have faith to believe, also, that your nature is honorable, and that your sympathies would go with the worthy and deserving as against evil-doers."

"Correct, sir, correct!"

"You have volunteered to help me."

"I have—I do."

"Then, believing in your honor, I accept your offer with gratitude."

The speaker's voice was unsteady but earnest, and he stretched out his hand. Kit gave it a hearty pressure.

"Parson, I'm a man of few words, and those I try to make to the point. I hate to see condemned rascals rule the roost; if you see fit to take me in as a fighting partner, I'll stand by you through thick and thin!"

"I believe you, Mr. Jameson, and I'll come to the point at once. David Bastion told the truth in nearly every way; I am in the power of his mother, because of a secret which she holds. As he boasted, I dare not send them away."

"And this secret concerns Miss King?"

"Yes."

"She is ignorant of it?"

"Wholly."

"And you want to keep her so?"

"Her happiness depends upon it. Shall you be offended, sir, if I ask you to excuse me from telling what the secret is? It began and ended before Czarina was old enough to remember a thing—it even began before she was born. It does not concern her later years in any way, shape or manner, except that if she knew of it, it would cause her untold sorrow."

"Exactly. Well, I don't approve of flinging secrets around too loosely, especially when they concern young ladies. If I can work against the plotters, intelligently, without knowing the secret, I have no objection whatever to being kept in the dark."

This frank, generous statement made Perham's face brighten perceptibly.

"Thank you, sir; thank you!" he earnestly replied. "Your kindness is greatly appreciated. Well, then, the case is this, in few words: Mrs. Bastion has no direct power over me, for the secret does not concern me; but for Czarina's sake I must do all I can."

"Quite right. I approve that!"

"Mrs. Bastion has come here and, by means of the secret, forced herself upon me with her children. She said, at first, that she should remain only a few days, but, once domiciled, she has remained. She has made us all miserable, and, to-day, she blackmailed me for money to help her son carouse in the saloons. Think of that, sir, and I a preacher of the Gospel!"

"It's right tough, parson!"

"Of course I would have sent her away before now, but I dare not. She declares that if I attempt it, she will tell the secret to Czarina, and defies me."

"You're anxious to keep the secret from Miss King?"

"I would not have her know it for worlds!"

"And you don't know how to get the female Bastion out of the house without her telling it?"

"That is just it."

"Why, parson, it's as easy as pulling teeth!"

"It is?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"The first step is to put Miss King where Bastion can't get at her. Have you friends in towns near here?"

"There is the Reverend Mr. Sherrick, at Belated Camp."

"Just the place. It is thirty miles away, and the female Bastion is not likely to go there. Well, send Czarina there!"

A brighter look flashed to Perham's face than had been there before in many a day.

"Just the idea, upon my word!" he cried.

"When she is gone, so that our belligerent female can't possibly see her, we will descend upon the female like an avalanche. I have a bit of silver in the way of a badge which will pass for that of a detective, though it is not. Imagine a scene like this:

"I touch the female on the shoulder and say: 'Bastion, skedaddle!' She will say: 'I won't!' I shall gently add, *a la* a roaring lion: 'I am a detective; you have blackmailed the parson; Bastion, get out or you'll get in—to prison!'"

"All this will be dramatic, and I shall score a success. The one grip upon which the pugnacious female relies can't be used, for Czarina will be gone, and the horde of vandals will pack their collar-boxes and put the Rogues' March into practical use. See?"

Perham's eyes were sparkling with pleasure.

"Grand! grand!" he exclaimed.

"Effective, at least."

"But David may resist, physically."

"If he does he will soon be a hospital case."

Once more Perham grasped Kit's hand.

"Mr. Jameson, you have made me a happy man!" he declared, warmly. "How can I ever repay you? And to think that the simple expedient of sending Czarina away never once occurred to me!"

"Have you any excuse to give her for going?"

"N—no."

"Is the parson of Belated Camp a healthy man?"

"Mr. Sherrick is, but his wife is something of an invalid."

"Does she know Czarina?"

"Yes; and loves her well."

"Mrs. Sherrick will be seized with a feeling of great loneliness, or homesickness, and a tincture of the blues. She will feel an ungovernable desire to have Czarina with her. She is advanced in years—Or isn't she? How is it?"

"She is."

"I thought she must be. Well, Czarina can't refuse the earnest request of an aged, kindly old friend. See?"

"Indeed, I do; and your idea is great."

Saddle-Chief Kit abruptly rose.

"I'm off for Belated Camp. At present, Mrs. Sherrick is not lonesome, homesick or blue, but the sight of me will make her so—when I explain that she ought to be. She will send back word by me to have Miss King visit her at once; Miss King will agree; Miss King will go; then you and I will sort of fall heavily upon the Bastion vampires with a dull thud, and the gang will pack and skedaddle!"

The last words were spoken at the door, and before the confused but happy minister could reply, Kit was gone.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE BLACKSMITH DRAWS HIS KNIFE.

THE shadows of evening were gathering, and Hall Pembroke was walking near the outskirts of the town. Despite the discovery of the silver plate at his shop he was a free man, but he could see that his character had gone down. There are plenty of persons eager to grasp at the breath of suspicion, and as the story of the plate had gone abroad, there were many who saw fit to believe Hall guilty.

He saw this in the meaning glances cast upon him, but he bore it philosophically. He had greater troubles than the loss of their good opinion.

Passing on aimlessly, he suddenly heard the sound of steps, and Jessie Hollis appeared only a few steps away. She had a package in her hand, and was evidently returning home after doing some errand.

Pembroke's face brightened, and he started to join her, but some one else was ahead of him. A man abruptly appeared, and Hall scowled as he recognized Judah Mardwin.

His swarthy rival raised his hat to the girl.

"Good-evening, Jessie," he said. "I did not expect to have the good fortune of meeting you."

"I am going home," she answered, curtly.

"I will accompany you."

"Excuse me, but I must decline your company."

"Why so?"

"It is not welcome."

"Plain talk, at least, Jessie, though it gives me pain. Pray, what have I done to forfeit your good opinion?"

"I have no explanation to make, Mr. Mardwin, except that I don't like you. I bear you no ill-will, but it is my wish that, henceforth, our acquaintance shall be of the most formal kind."

Jessie had spoken plainly at last, and it was most agreeable to Hall Pembroke. He stood still, drinking in every word and rejoicing at the blow to his rival's hopes, but Judah conducted himself with most exemplary moderation.

"You grieve me deeply, Miss Hollis," he replied, "but your wishes make my law. The will of a lady is a paramount claim to the goodwill of all honorable men."

"I am glad you think so," Jessie returned, a touch of skepticism in her voice.

"I believe I will leave Si Gotch," Judah pursued, "and I fancy my friend, Pem, will go with me. You have heard of the unfortunate affair in which he is concerned?"

"He is innocent," declared Jessie, with spirit. "I'll stake my life upon it," quickly, deeply added Judah. "It is not in Hall Pembroke's nature to do a wrong act."

"You are right."

"He is innocent, and it will be proved. I regret that Pem let the matter pass so easily at the shop. He told me, only a few days ago, that when you and he were married he was going to buy, as a wedding present, just such a set of sil-

ver, though he was short of money. I accidentally referred to this before I knew trouble was afloat, and Quinn tried to use it against him.

"Mr. Pembroke said he was going to buy silver plate?" questioned Jessie, knitting her brows.

"Yes."

"Why should he do that? We are poor."

"Possibly he knew where to get some cheap."

"I don't believe any can be bought near Si Gotch."

"One set was here, and you've seen that Pembroke got it. Ha! ha! Possibly he referred to that, when he spoke to me, and intended to buy that."

"Judah Mardwin, you are conveying the impression that Hall *did* take the plate!" exclaimed Jessie.

"Nonsense! Pembroke isn't that sort of a man. He told me, it is true, that he should 'raise the desired articles some dark night,' but I understood that he meant that he should ride over to Cobble Camp and purchase it after his day's work was done."

Mardwin's words, significant as they were, did not convey as much as his insinuating manner. While he affirmed that Pembroke was innocent his every tone and way was that of one who knows an accused person is guilty, but wishes to defend him from the suspicions of others.

All this Pembroke himself heard, and he was lashed to fury. He had all day been yielding to the idea that he *must* some time slay Mardwin, and that the sooner it was done, the better, and he had not the old control over his emotions.

More clearly than Jessie he saw the attempt to poison her mind against him, and he could hardly keep from revealing himself. This, however, he dared not do. He had borne Mardwin's persecutions until the limit of endurance was reached, and he determined to bear no more. He drew his knife and crouched like a tiger in the bushes.

Had he felt able to control himself he would have gone to Jessie's aid, and ordered his enemy away, but he was afraid that he should kill the man before her eyes.

Doomed though Mardwin was, the deed must be kept from her knowledge. When she was gone he would be alone with Mardwin, and then—

He looked at his knife with a terrible smile.

Jessie would endure no more.

"We part here, Judah Mardwin!" she exclaimed. "I will not listen to you any longer, for your malevolence is visible in every word. You seek to injure Hall, but, thank Heaven! I know him too well to be influenced by any calumnies. From this time, sir, you and I are strangers!"

She started quickly along, and Judah did not attempt to follow or to reply. He shrugged his shoulders, and smiled cynically.

"Constancy, your name is woman, but you and she are alike of brittle stuff. The fair Jessie shall yet be convinced!"

He turned and sauntered away, and after him glided Hall Pembroke. The latter's chance had come, but there was no need of haste. They were near the houses of Si Gotch, and so near Jessie's that any outcry might reach her ears; while Judah's course was away from all the scenes where discovery lurked. He was moving toward the uninhabited hills, and there, it seemed probable, no one would interfere between them.

Silently, patiently, craftily as an Indian did Pembroke follow his prey, the long knife grasped in his hand. It was a hold which would not fail at the crisis; no longer did Mardwin awaken nervous uncertainty in the blacksmith's mind.

The die was cast, and his nerves were of iron. Judah went on carelessly, whistling in a barely audible way, and wholly unconscious of the dark figure which was coming behind him. The shades of twilight grew deeper, and began closing around the two, and the grim shape of Mount Lookout projected its shadow, darker yet, down the hillside just in front of them. Pembroke saw the shadow, and decided that there should the deed be done.

On went pursuer and pursued. Judah entered the shadow. Pembroke quickened his pace and raised his knife. A few seconds more would have settled all, but there was an interruption.

As Pembroke passed a dwarfed tree, a hand was suddenly laid upon his arm and he was brought to a halt. Startled, he raised his weapon, but his hand fell nervelessly to his side.

Tyrington Perham stood beside him.

The sight took all the strength from the blacksmith's arm, and he stood like one turned to stone.

"What would you do?" the minister solemnly asked. "Remember the Divine command, 'Thou shalt not kill!'"

Pembroke gasped for breath and stood dumb.

Perham knew his secret; Perham knew how near he had been to murder; and the strong ascendancy the good old man held over his afflicted friend was now a blow stronger than any one else could have given.

Perham stood erect and seemed to tower above the other man in stature as he did, at that moment, mentally. The preacher of the Word was

at his best, he was on familiar ground—ground plainly marked by the Bible—and all his usual uncertainty was gone. He was strong, grave, impressive and accusing.

"What would you do?" he added, deeply.

"I—I don't know!" Pembroke faltered.

"There is murder in your heart; you would have struck down a fellow-man!"

"He drove me to it!" muttered Pembroke.

"Do you remember your pledge to me?"

"Yes."

"You promised to control yourself."

"If I could."

"If you could! Are you a man, and make such a confession of weakness?"

Pembroke flung his knife aside.

"I am a miserable wretch!" he cried; "a lost, lost wretch!"

He covered his face with his hands and leaned against the tree, weak and trembling.

"Hall Pembroke, only that I had come to your aid; only that I had seen you by chance as I wandered idly about here; you would be a murderer now! The moment your awful passion was satisfied you would be a man hunted and hounded by his fellow-men. To the end of your life, awake or sleeping, the shadow of the gallows would fall upon you as falls the shadow of Mount Lookout at our feet. And was it for that you would have broken your pledge to me? Was it for that you would have slain a fellow-man? Oh! my erring brother, remember you not the Divine words?—'Thou shalt not kill!'"

The light of a great peace, of Christian trust, of pity and of great tenderness was upon Tyrington Perham's face, and a tear from his eyes fell upon one of Hall Pembroke's hands, which he had taken in his own.

"Forbear! forbear!" gasped the blacksmith. "You know how he has tempted me."

"I have heard what he said in your shop."

"I was innocent; I swear it!"

"I believe you, poor soul."

"Yet, he tried to ruin me, and, to-night, he has poured the poison of his venomous falsehoods into Jessie Hollis's ears. Can I bear all this?"

"Justice will triumph in the end."

"But he is drawing the net more tightly against me every day. He has turned other men against me, and will ruin me beyond redemption."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A CHECK TO THE GAME.

PEMBROKE did not speak bitterly or rebelliously, but his words were those of a man who is unutterably wretched and without hope. Perham held his hand as he might that of a grieving child, but the minister's compassion turned to a source higher than the crowning point of Mount Lookout, seeking aid and mutely praying for power to convince that darkened mind.

"Let not your heart be troubled," he answered. "There is One who will watch over and protect you. Judah Mardwin's falsehoods will recoil upon himself, and the real criminal be discovered. As for Jessie Hollis, do you think she will believe him?"

"Never!"

"Then why despond?"

"You don't know how he has hounded me!"

"You have told me a part."

"He drives me mad."

"Be of good cheer. He is not a good citizen, and I will consult with our leading men to see if he ought not to be expelled from Si Gotch."

"You don't know the shame that is upon me. Look at me! I am twenty-five pounds heavier than Mardwin, and my muscles are hardened with toil; his, weakened by an indolent and dissipated life. The man would be a child in my hands, yet I dare not lay hands upon him; I dare not defend myself or Jessie from him. If once I raise my hand in anger against him, I shall end his miserable life."

"Are you so beyond self-control?"

"I am helpless in the hands of fate. The doom which overtook my ancestors will be mine, struggle as I may, and do, against it. From the hour when first I saw Mardwin I have never had a doubt that I was created to slay him. My ancestors struggled in vain; in vain will my struggle be made. He will die at my hands!"

"Madman!"

"Perhaps I am mad, for I have seen things not of earth. I have seen the red mist; I have seen the figure of my *Tempter*, distinct yet beyond description, standing within the mist. I have seen his finger point to Mardwin and his lips command, 'Kill! kill!'"

Perham's hand sought his companion's wrist. "Fever, high fever!" he commented.

"So is there fever in the volcano's heart."

The minister hesitated for a moment. Darkness had fallen and they were alone in Lookout's shadow. Judah Mardwin, who had heard nothing, suspected nothing, had gone on and might be a mile away. Perham did not care for him. He linked his arm within Pembroke's and drew him away.

"Come to my study," he said, kindly.

"Just as you wish."

Perham dropped the previous subject, and on the way spoke cheerfully of other matters. The blacksmith grew calm with unexpected quick-

ness, and his quiet, logical, unhesitating replies seemed to puzzle the elder man more than ever.

His manner was not that of one deranged, or disturbed by fever, but Tyrington Perham could not believe in the "fate," the accursed inheritance, or the *Tempter* so strongly believed in by Pembroke.

What, then, was he to think?

They went to his study as he desired, and there they remained during the evening. Perham had set his heart upon curing Hall of his belief, and he labored as he had never done before. Every argument of logic, science, religion and common sense that he could think of was used; and he made a great effort to crush his companion's belief in "fate," and to save him from committing crime.

He had a docile listener. Pembroke heard and tried to be convinced because he wished to be, but it was a failure.

When Perham was done, Pembroke still believed that he was destined to kill Mardwin, and that nothing could save him from it.

The minister was deeply disappointed, but he had to be content with Hall's promise that he do his utmost to avoid trouble.

When the visitor departed Perham watched him out of sight and shook his head gloomily.

"Grave forebodings beset me!" he murmured.

"The man is not cured of his mania, and if Mardwin persists in annoying him, I tremble for the result. I hope all will be well, but—"

He sighed deeply and closed the door. If he had spoken his mind freely he would have admitted that he had a presentiment as well as Pembroke, and that it was to the effect that Mardwin would soon meet with a violent end.

That night the minister slept but little. He worried about his friend, and the fact that a crisis was approaching in his own affairs made him nervous.

Saddle-Chief Kit had gone to Belated Camp to see the Reverend Mr. Sherrick, but would be back in the morning. When he came the crisis would be at hand.

At breakfast the next morning, the Bastions were in high spirits. They all knew of Esther's success in getting the ten dollars from Perham, and, believing that it was only the beginning of a financial rain which would fill those empty but greedy reservoirs, their pockets, they were exultant, and more than ever impudent.

An hour later came Saddle-Chief Kit, who was closeted for some time with Perham; and when he went away, Czarina was summoned to her guardian.

"My dear," said Perham, "I have heard from the Sherricks."

"I suppose they are well as usual?"

"Mrs. Sherrick is not in the best of health."

Perham tried to speak with an air of concern, but he was so much elated that it was hard not to announce the alleged illness as a joyful fact. Everything was arranged for Czarina to go to Belated Camp, and when she was gone, the Bastions were to be dealt with summarily. Consequently, Perham was in great good humor.

"I trust Mrs. Sherrick's illness is not serious," answered Czarina, anxiously.

"Not particularly—not by any means. The fact is, she is not as young as she was once, and she confesses to being homesick and lonesome."

"Indeed! I am sorry."

"She has planned a remedy."

"What is it?"

"To have you visit her."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, and I quite approve of it. Mrs. Granger can manage here, and Mrs. Sherrick is too good a friend to be neglected. She is no longer young, and has great claims upon our consideration."

"I should certainly be glad to oblige her, and to go, but when you speak of Mrs. Granger, you forget that she is to leave us to-morrow."

"She has consented to remain."

This was a fact. Perham had seen the housekeeper, and by promising her that the Bastions should go inside of forty-eight hours, had won her pledge to stay.

"Then perhaps I can go," Czarina admitted.

"Certainly you can, my dear; and Mrs. Sherrick would be deeply disappointed if you did not."

"I will go."

Perham smiled broadly.

"That's right, Czarina; always be kind to the aged."

"By the way, how did you get word?"

"By Mr. Jameson. He was going to Belated Camp, and I asked him to call on Brother Sherrick and give him my regards. When can you start?"

"Within two hours. But can you get along with the Bastions, uncle?"

"Oh, yes; and I fancy they will not remain over a couple of days, anyhow."

"In that case I have nothing to keep me here, and I thank you for the leave of absence. I shall be glad to get away for awhile."

"Quite right; and the change will do you good."

"I will get ready at once."

Czarina's face, like her guardian's, was brighter and happier than usual. She had always been cheerful and satisfied until the Bastions came, but the prospect of getting away from them was a great relief.

Mr. Perham watched her as she moved quickly toward the door, but at that point she paused. Her hand was on the latch, but she hesitated. Then she turned and he saw that the brightness had faded from her face.

"I've changed my mind!" she murmured, abruptly.

"Eh?"

"I can't go to Belated Camp!"

"Bless me! Why not?"

"I don't think I want to go."

"You don't?"

"No."

"But you said only a minute ago that you would be glad to go."

"I've changed my mind."

Czarina spoke gloomily, almost fretfully, and looked not at her guardian but at the floor.

"Isn't this a bit sudden?" asked Mr. Perham, in bewilderment.

"Yes, I suppose so."

"But why have you changed your mind?"

"You must excuse me, uncle; I can't tell you. I would go if I could, but circumstances forbid. When I promised to go I had—had forgotten one thing."

"I see no reason why you shouldn't go."

"Such a reason exists, and I cannot go."

"Czarina, this is a deep disappointment to me!" uttered Mr. Perham, and his downcast expression showed how sincere his statement was.

"I am sorry."

"My dear, it is my wish that you should go," said the minister, with firmness which surprised her.

"Indeed! why are you so anxious?"

The question confused him, and he was annoyed to feel his face flush. He was reminded that he, too, had a secret.

"A—well, Mrs. Sherrick will be disappointed."

"She has many devoted friends at Belated Camp, and though I am extremely sorry to fail her, I am forced to say that she will, for a time, have to rely upon them. The circumstances which lead me to a decision are such that I have absolutely no choice in the matter. I cannot go! This may seem strange to you, but I ask your forbearance. Let it rest, uncle, and trust in my judgment. It is best that I don't go to Belated Camp!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

ESTHER CALLS FOR A "CHAPPYRUN!"

CZARINA had recovered her usual composure, and the firmness of her voice satisfied Mr. Perham that he would plead in vain if he tried to change her resolution. He said well when he declared that it was a deep disappointment to him. After enduring the Bastions hopelessly, he had seen the way to relief opened by Saddle-Chief Kit, but Czarina had overturned all their plans.

How was she to be removed from Si Gotch, and the hearing of Esther Bastion's secret, when she refused to go?

"You said, at first, that you would be glad to go!" the minister burst out irritably.

"True; but I had forgotten the one thing which will keep me here," the girl replied.

"It can't be very important, if it was so long in occurring to you."

"On the contrary, it is important."

"What tie can you have that must keep you here?"

"There is something very much like suspicion in your voice, Uncle Perham. Is that just?"

"Forgive me, Czarina; I meant no harm. It was only because it was so great a disappointment."

"You show a singular anxiety to have me go. May I ask what it is?"

Again Perham became confused. He was not quick-witted enough to resort to any expedient, or half-way measure; and with the idea in his mind that he must tell all if told anything, and state that there was a secret which menaced her happiness, and which, consequently, she must not learn; he took the opposite extreme and stammered:

"Oh! it is nothing, nothing at all. You need not go unless you wish."

Guardian and ward looked at each other for a moment and then his gaze fell.

"I am going out, now, Czarina," he abruptly added.

He was in a fever to see Saddle-Chief Kit; to explain the perplexing, disheartening turn that affairs had taken; and to have the Prairie Centaur bring his strong mind to bear upon the case. Czarina did not object to his departure, although she seemed to be deeply troubled by the situation, and he was soon on the street, hurrying toward Kit's hotel.

The Centaur was in his room, and there Perham found him.

"So! you've got around quickly," Kit observed.

"Enough time has elapsed for me to score a failure," answered the minister, as he sunk into a chair.

"How's that?"

"Czarina refuses to leave Si Gotch!"

"The dickens she does!"

"Yes."

"What is her reason?"

"She refuses to give a reason."

"Did you tell her how homesick and blue Mrs. Sherrick was?"

"Yes."

"And the deplorable state of the aged lady failed to move the young lady's heart to pity, did it?"

"It is very mysterious. She at first consented to go, showing no hesitation, and even said she would be very glad to do so; then she abruptly changed her mind, said that she could not go, and resisted all my entreaties. It is very odd, indeed; I don't understand it."

"Possibly Miss King does not, either. It is necessary, Mr. Perham, to remember that our young lady is a woman. As such, she is beyond the limits of logic. The minds of the fair sex are like weather-vanes. They may point dead to the north one minute, but if the wind changes they can fluke around to the north-nor'west, by a little westerly; and then flop to the south like a rocket. That's one of the chief charms of the sex; the beautiful uncertainty of where we will find them is entrancing. But this is not to the point. We will assume that our particular young lady is logical. Tell me all about it."

Kit tipped his chair back, and prepared to listen serenely. His pet scheme was upset, but he was in no degree discouraged.

Perham described the interview with Czarina, and was able to repeat almost word for word what had been said, so that when he was done, Kit had a pretty clear view of the case.

The Centaur was puzzled, and all the more so because, despite his cynical dissertation on woman-kind, he did not regard Czarina as a person of vacillating mind.

He was of the opinion that she had some good reason for her course, though what it was he did not know.

"So you really think she means it?" he asked.

"I regret to answer that I do."

"But you can't surmise her reason?"

"No."

"And she refused to tell it?"

"She did, sir."

"Then we will get along without it."

"Must we give up our hopes?"

"Give 'em up?" echoed Kit. "Well, I should say not!"

"Is there still a chance?" Perham asked, eagerly.

"Why, of course; I'll see Czarina."

"You cannot turn her from her resolution, I fear."

"I shall not try, as far as Belated Camp is concerned. It is clear that her objection is to leave Si Gotch; she has some reason for wishing to remain here. Well, we'll let her do so, but she shall leave your house. I'll see her and address words of wisdom to her somewhat thusly: 'Miss King, it is best that you should go visiting for a few days. We, the powers that be, purpose to take the Bastions by the collar and precipitate them, jointly and severally, into the ditch. When we do it there will be a commotion; the volcano which bubbles and seethes in the Bastion heart will burst forth with vigor. There is likely to be unpleasant times; it is best that you be conspicuous by your absence then!'"

"There is hope in that!" exclaimed Perham, his downcast expression losing ground.

"Rather!"

"But Esther Bastion will insist upon going to see Czarina."

"We won't leave that amiable female a peg to stand on. It shall be announced that Miss King has gone to Belated Camp. 'Well, suppose the female Bastion goes there to find her? Will she make a success? I infer that she will not!'"

Perham wrung his companion's hand.

"Mr. Jameson, you are worth your weight in gold!" he declared, with enthusiasm.

"Oh! I'm a wily old rat!" was the good-humored reply.

"When will you see Czarina?"

"Can you send her on an errand to a remote part of the village, so that I can see her without having the Bastions get their eyes on us?"

"It was her intention to call at the west end of the town just after dinner, and I presume she will do so."

"Just the thing; and if she don't go, send her. She will hardly refuse to go on an errand, will she?"

"Oh! no."

"Let it go that way, then. I'll be on the watch, and I'll see her and talk business. I contract to convince the young lady, and that, too, without having her suspect the real reason why you want her absent from your house."

"Thank you, Mr. Jameson; thank you. You are very kind; I don't know what I should do without you!"

Kit accepted this tribute in his usual good-humored way, and after a brief additional conversation the two separated and went home.

Perham was full of gratitude and admiration. In his opinion the Centaur was a marvel of

shrewdness, and he was not one to refuse homage to genius—especially when it was used to free him from embarrassment and trouble. He was helpless enough to lean upon some one, and Kit's was a strong arm.

In the mean while, Czarina had had an unpleasant experience at home. After her guardian went out she had gone about her work in a thoughtful way, but was finally interrupted by the appearance of Esther.

"I've got a word ter say ter you!" announced that person.

"Have you?"

"Yes; you're an upper-tener here."

"A what?"

"You belong to the upper ten."

"I don't think Si Gotch can boast of an aristocracy."

"I know somebody that tries ter be 'ristocratic!" declared Esther, elevating her proboscis. "That ain't ter the p'int, though. What I want is your help."

"In what?"

"My sweet children are pinin' fur society. David, o' course, has been out, but my poor Pansy hain't gone nowhere. Well, she wants ter, an' she's goin'; she's goin' inter society, an' that's where you come in useful. I want you ter take her an' David, an' take 'em ter call on the best families in Si Gotch. I s'pose it's fashionable among the *ee-light* ter have a *chappy-run*, though you wouldn't be no great shakes; but you kin introduce my dear children ter your high-and-lofty friends as wal as anybody."

"Pray, Mrs. Bastion, am I not to be consulted in the matter?" asked Czarina, her face flushing.

"What d'ye mean?"

"Wouldn't it be well to ask me to do this, rather than to command me?"

"Don't make any difference, long's it's done."

"It is not done, and will not be done," Czarina replied, calmly but firmly. "I must decline to introduce your son and daughter to any one!"

"You do?"

"Yes."

Esther was in a passion. Her eyes flashed, and her big, coarse face was spotted.

"Mebbe you think you're too good?" she cried.

"I have no reasons to give."

"Well, I've got somethin' ter say, just the same, my lady. I'll bet you two ter one that you take Pansy an' David under your wing an' tote 'em jest where I say."

"We will not discuss the matter," quietly returned Czarina.

"No, but we'll do more. I'll see old man Perham, an' you'll find he will order you ter do jest what I say. You ought ter know I ain't no small figger in this house, by this time. You've tried your best ter git us sent away. How've you come out? Take warnin', Miss Lofty, an' don't git set down on ag'in! I say that you'll make yourself useful ter my sweet children, an' ef you won't do it o' your own free will, I'll make ye. Now, then, what hev ye got ter say ter that?"

CHAPTER XXX.

CZARINA GAINS NEW LIGHT.

UTTERING these words venomously, Esther placed her arms akimbo, threw back her head and looked daggers at her companion; but Czarina remained far calmer than was to be expected.

"Neither of us will gain any honor by continuing this conversation," she responded, "and I have no more to say. You will excuse me now, as I have work to do elsewhere."

She moved toward the door, but Esther blocked her way.

"Not so fast, Miss Lofty!" she sneered. "Before you go sailin' away like a queen I have a word ter say to you. You carry your head mighty high, but I've heerd o' queens losin' their heads—had 'em cut off, slap! You ain't no safer than them was. I can humble you so you will envy the worms that crawl in the dust, and I'll do it, too!"

"Mrs. Bastion, you forget your position here!"

"Whatever I forgit, I remember that I hev you an' that weak-minded parson right in the holler o' my hand. When I pull the string he jumps, an' I'll make you dance, too!"

"As Mr. Perham's guest you have some claims upon my forbearance, Mrs. Bastion, but I will hear no more. I wish to pass!"

"I shall move at my convenience. Ef you think you kin hurry me, call Perham. Bah! he da'ssen't say a word ter rile me!"

Czarina had already had painful proof of that fact, and she felt her position a most humiliating one. Deep was her indignation, but, as she was not a man, she could not maintain her rights by force, and there was no one to whom she could appeal.

She felt herself reduced to the extreme of degradation.

Mrs. Bastion was watching her critically, and, it may be, she thought the persecution had been carried far enough.

"I'll let ye go fur now," she added, after a pause, "but jest you bear in mind that you are ter do as I say. You will escort Pansy an' David 'round 'bout town, an' no power kin save ye from it. Chew on that!"

With this coarse, brutal conclusion Esther stepped to one side, and Czarina was free to go. She did not neglect the chance. Biting her lips to keep back the indignant words which struggled for utterance, she passed Mrs. Bastion in silence and hurried up-stairs.

As chance would have it, she had barely reached the second floor when the outer door opened and Tyrington Perham entered.

Esther's fountain of malevolent mischief boiled again.

"So you're back, Tyrie!" she exclaimed. "You're jest the man I want ter see."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. We've been in Si Gotch some time now, but my children ain't been inter sassiety none. I want Pansy an' David ter go, an' they be goin'; an' I want you ter send the Ling girl along as their *chappyrin*."

"How's that?"

"I want her ter go along with 'em. You may as wal agree to it right off, fur you hadn't dare refuse."

"To be sure, Mrs. Bastion. Czarina will be pleased to help your children, and I will speak to her about it. Yes, yes; she shall go with them."

Now, this speech had a surface and a secret meaning. Mr. Perham had seemed to yield very readily to Mrs. Bastion's commands, but he had done it because he was strong in the belief that the Bastions would be expelled from the house within twenty-four hours. As long as they were to be sent off, why quarrel about minor matters?

Czarina did not have this secret understanding. Although invisible to Mr. Perham she was still where she overheard this conversation, and the words fell upon her ears with painful force.

To all appearances the minister had abandoned all idea of resisting Mrs. Bastion's impudent claims, and was as helpless in her hands as a child.

Czarina waited for no more. She retreated to her room, locked the door, dropped into a chair and, for the first time in Esther's rule, burst into tears. She had borne prolonged impudence, insults and interference patiently, for her guardian's sake, but the last hope appeared to be gone, and her nature arose in bitter rebellion.

"Oh! if I were a man—if I were only a man!" she panted, rather than exclaimed.

Her hands locked and unlocked nervously.

"I can bear this no longer!" she added, bitterly. "I had hoped to see a change for the better, but it has been just the opposite. What does it mean? Weak as Tyrington Perham is, he should have some manhood left; he should, at least, preserve me from insult! He does not, and there is no one else to whom I can turn."

The stubborn truth forced itself upon her that what was needed at that moment was a MAN, and one of courage; and for a moment she had an unpleasant conviction that she had not done the wisest thing in the world when she took position as a hater of the ruder sex.

She forced the idea aside. A man could forcibly eject the Bastions, but she had claim upon no one.

"What can be that woman's hold upon Mr. Perham?" she continued, aloud. "He is too good to have ever committed a crime, but she has some hold upon him. If I were a man—"

She paused and made an impatient movement.

"A man!—always 'a man!'" she bitterly exclaimed. "That is fine talk for one who despises the lords of creation. I hate myself as much as I do them—yet, I wish I had a brother who could stand up boldly against those wretched Bastions!"

There was but little consolation in this wish, and when she remembered that she was approaching the pale of day-dreaming, she arose impatiently.

"I won't think of it!" she declared.

This was a good resolution, and she kept it sufficiently well to cease weeping. Making herself busy about the room, she soon succeeded in regaining her composure and firmness, and when she went down to superintend the dinner, she gave no evidence of the recent emotional storm.

At the table she was made to feel the weight of Esther's venom. For some reason no reference was made to the woman's latest scheme, but she gave Czarina many thrusts which were full of malevolence. Czarina disregarded them, and so did Mr. Perham, but they awoke responsive irritation in their minds.

Czarina had planned to visit the west end of the village, and she went at once when dinner was over.

She longed to get away from the Bastions.

After leaving she walked mechanically, but rapidly, toward her destination. Her mind still dwelt upon the state of affairs at the house, and she began to feel some bitterness toward Perham. Surely, she thought, there could be no sufficient reason why they should be compelled to endure so much.

"Oh! that Tyrington Perham had the firmness of other men!" she thought, resentfully.

She had reached one of the ridges which bounded "Purgatory Road," and as she looked across she saw Saddle-Chief Kit coming from the opposite side.

She had learned to think better of him than in the first days of their acquaintance, and the recognition brought no regret. Her pride had been humbled to the dust, and as she had reason to believe that he was really her friend, she greeted him, when they met, with a gracious smile.

"Out for a walk?" he asked, lightly.

"I was going to the west village."

"If you're not in a hurry, I'd like a word with you."

"I am not."

Kit noticed that the coldness once to be observed in her manner was gone, but he did not assume an air more than respectful.

"What I wanted was to refer to your visit to Belated Camp," he explained.

"I have decided not to go."

"So I have heard, and as I was the bearer of the invitation from Mrs. Sherrick, I am naturally interested. Allow me to ask a question, if you please. Would your objection to going to Belated Camp also prevent you from leaving your own home, if you went to some other house in Si Gotch?"

"I am not sure that I understand."

"Would you refuse to remove for a few days from Mr. Perham's to some other house in this place?"

Czarina's surprise was shown in her expression.

"Why should I do that?" she asked.

"I'll try to explain. I have the honor to be somewhat in your guardian's confidence, and am working for him. He is so unfortunate, just now, as to have the Bastions quartered upon him. He wishes to get rid of them, but is well aware that they will not go willingly. They must be put out forcibly, and when that is done there will be the tallest kind of a row, to put it bluntly. Being well aware that if you are then present you will be exposed to a good deal of insult and mortification, he wishes to spare you that. It was to save you that the visit to Belated Camp was planned; you would not have received Mrs. Sherrick's invitation had I not gone over and requested it. I state this with your guardian's sanction."

Czarina looked bewildered.

"This is very strange!" she murmured.

"A trifle, I will admit."

"Why didn't Mr. Perham tell me why he wished me to go?"

"He wanted to keep you ignorant of the coming tempest in his house."

"Is he really going to send the Bastions away?"

"Yes."

"They will not go for him."

Kit smiled grimly.

"That's where I come in, Miss King. It isn't modest to boast, but it's the plain truth that when I order the Bastion colony to get out, *they are going!* Muscle will tell!"

Czarina's eyes were sparkling.

"Has this really been determined upon?"

"It has."

"And you are going to aid Mr. Perham to put them out forcibly?"

"I rely upon him to superintend the work. I shall do the talking—and the fighting, if the expression don't alarm you. To boil it down—pray don't think me a braggart, Miss King—I intend to chuck them out heels over head, and I can do it!"

Calm, systematic Czarina now surprised both Kit Jameson and herself. She gave him her hand impulsively, and the sparkle in her eyes and the flush in her cheeks made her look prettier than ever.

"Mr. Jameson!" she exclaimed, "if you will clear our house of those wretches you will win my undying gratitude."

"I'll do it."

"They have humiliated me to the lowest depths; I shall rejoice in their downfall."

"It will be a good deed."

"As for the plans you have for me, I agree to them readily. I have—have good reasons why I do not wish to leave Si Gotch, but I shall be glad to go to some other house and avoid all part in the trouble when they are sent away."

"Exactly. There is a condition about it, however. When you are gone it will be announced that you have gone to Belated Camp, and it will be necessary for you to keep close indoors, and not let any one know you are still in Si Gotch. This is to keep the Bastions away from you. If they learn that you are here, Esther will flutter down upon you at the first note of alarm."

"I agree to all this."

"Have you any place in mind where you can go?"

"My choice would be with Jessie Hollis, and I will see her on my way home."

"Good! You will be safe there, and I think you'll sleep there to-night. Things are working famously, and I don't see any reason why we shouldn't score a success. The Bastion dynasty is trembling on its base!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A DEED WHICH MAY CAUSE TROUBLE.

THE stage from Cobble Camp was not due in Si Gotch until two hours after dark. For several miles the road was a hard one, being uphill, crooked and rough, but during the last half-hour of the trip the ground descended and the vehicle went bowling merrily toward the smaller village.

On the evening of the day when occurred the last scenes of our story, Pete Jordan, the stage-driver, yawned and straightened up as he neared the highest point of land. A little further and his slow progress would give place to a sharp trot, and he would be correspondingly pleased.

He glanced up toward the summit of Mount Lookout, which reared up in the sky, black and frowning, with a clear, star-gemmed expanse of the heavens all around it.

"Light enough up thar!" muttered Pete; "but it's dark an' pokerish down hyar in the gulch. Wish I had a passenger ter talk with, but I ain't. Git up, Isaac! G'lang, Jacob!"

Isaac and Jacob were his horses, and they pricked up their ears and quickened their pace.

Pete shut his eyes and shook his head.

"I'd like suthin' bet—Hullo! what's the matter, thar? G'lang, Isaac! Git up, Jacob!"

The driver opened his eyes suddenly as the horses came to a stop, and the advice he gave them was good, but they did not start. At the same moment Pete's hat was knocked off, and, turning, he saw the muzzle of a revolver close to his head and a man behind it.

"Hands up!" cried the man.

"Chestnuts!" retorted Pete; "you can't scare me, especially with a stale order. 'Hands up!' is wore threadbare. Why don't ye say, 'Steady!—not a wiggle?'"

The driver imagined the whole thing to be a joke, but he was soon shown that it was not. A hand closed upon his throat from the opposite side, and it dawned upon him that trouble was in the air. He made a quick move, but *thud!* *thud!* came the revolver, used as a club, down upon his head.

"Hold the horses tight, Pembroke!" shouted one of Pete's immediate assailants.

Poor Pete was in a bad way. He was a brave man, and was making all the fight he could, but he had begun too late. The blows confused him, and he suddenly lost all consciousness of what was going on and fell back on the box, insensible.

When this became apparent to the assailants they ceased their blows. One laid hold of the mail-bag, which had been between Pete's feet, and then both leaped to the ground.

The horses, unconscious of the trouble their master was in, were standing still in the grasp of a third man. The first two had no sooner reached the ground than they began to cut the traces. The horses were soon freed from the stage, but no effort was made to start them on.

"All right!" announced one of the trace-cutters.

The man at the animals' heads released his hold.

"Now let's be off!" added the previous speaker.

"Is the driver done for?"

"Yes."

"Hope you haven't killed him."

"Do you take me for a novice?"

"Anything else, by Jove!"

"Now, let's be off!"

All seemed to be of one accord, and they started at a moderate run along the trail to Si Gotch. "No more talk until we get to a safe place!" commanded the leader.

They went on briskly. There was no sound of horses' steps behind them, and it was evident that Isaac and Jacob had not deserted their master. How long they would remain with him was uncertain, but the time was near at hand when Si Gotch would be unpleasantly informed that road-agents had descended upon them.

As the robbers went on the lights of Si Gotch were visible in advance, but they continued boldly until within a comparatively short distance of the town. Then they turned to the left and made their way a hundred rods among the rocks and bushes.

There the leader paused.

"As well close up the job here as anywhere. The rocks are high; there is no danger of discovery."

They paused, and one of their number produced a small lantern. It was soon lighted, and the light revealed the trio plainly—all but their faces. Over these masks were worn.

"Now, then," added the spokesman, "squat down, all. This mail-bag has grown heavy, and my legs, too, are weary. How is it with you, Bastion?"

"I'm all right."

"You've done nobly on your maiden job—hasn't he, Mardwin?"

"Right well," agreed the third robber.

"He pounded the stage-driver merrily."

"Hold up, Dike!" hastily replied the object of these compliments. "The air has ears; I don't want ter be advertised here."

"Bless you, Dave, there's no danger. We are

not in an atom of danger, but I fancy I know some one who is. Judah, did you hear me shout, 'Hold the horses tight, Pembroke!' just before the driver lost consciousness?"

"I heard you, and you did well. But are you sure the driver caught the name?"

"I'm sure he did, and, besides, we left the revolver. Everybody knows that belongs to your friend 'Pem.' Oh! he's in the toils!"

"And we have the mail."

"Let's overhaul it an' git home!" nervously suggested the man who had been called David Bastion.

At this point of the adventure, unlike the time when the stage was being robbed, genuine names were used. The robbers were Dike Harrington, Judah Mardwin and David Bastion.

There was more to the affair than appeared on the surface. Each one of the trio desired the plunder which the mail-bag's contents might furnish, but Harrington and Mardwin each had another object in view. What the latter's was has already been shown; he had planned to have the robbery laid at Hall Pembroke's door.

Harrington wished to get Bastion wholly in his power. He had not yet learned the secret by which Esther controlled Tyrington Perham, but, eager to win Czarina by fair means or foul, he recognized the value of an alliance with the Bastions; and as his first attempt to get Esther's secret had resulted in the naming of a large sum of purchase money, he had concluded that he ought to have David wholly in his power.

This he had done at last. By making him a party to the robbery of the stage he had obtained a hold the Bastions would not dare to defy.

Depraved and vicious as David was he had never gone so boldly into crime before. He had been made party to the deed in the fullest sense; not only was he one of the trio, but he it was who had struck Pete Jordan with the revolver.

All this had been planned by Harrington, and Dave was wholly in his power.

The young reprobate did not suspect the snare into which he had walked so completely, but, now that the deed was done, he was filled with lively fears.

What if he should be detected?

He shivered at the thought, and was glad when Harrington cut open the mail-bag. The plunder there would be a salve to his fears, and he hoped it would fill his pockets for days to come.

"A good mail!" pronounced Dike. "It may not make us rich, but it is a centralization of wealth of which I highly approve."

"We ought to form a league of three and keep it up—I mean stage-robbing."

"I don't b'lieve I'd like it!" David hastily declared.

"Are you alarmed?" laughed Harrington.

"This is ticklish business."

"Right you are, Dave; if we get found out we shall all stretch hemp. The men of Si Gotch would string us up in short order. However, there is no fear as long as we stand by each other. Now for the mail."

Harrington spread it out.

"Of course," he added, "we can't stop to examine every letter here, so I will divide it into three equal parts, and each of us shall take home one-third and examine it there. Of course we are to share equally, as agreed upon, but we can trust one another. Each man shall take the money from his own letters and bring it to his fellows; then we'll split it by a figure '3' into just shares. See?"

"Yes," returned Mardwin.

"Yes," added David.

"I'll draw out all circulars so that we need not be burdened with them."

Dike went over the mail with the skill and rapidity of an expert. The circulars—of which there proved to be but three—were tossed aside, and the letters were arranged, as he went over them, in three equal piles.

Even there Harrington and Mardwin were doing their best to cheat David. Not for a moment had they intended to give him an equal share of the plunder, and the whole matter was arranged so as to get ahead of him. The talk about throwing out the circulars was only an excuse to enable Dike to handle each letter, and he did handle them to good purpose.

As he worked he noticed the address on each envelope, and, when possible, the postmark, and he disposed of them accordingly. Nearly all the Eastern letters, and all which came from large cities, were put in either Dike's or Judah's pile, while to Bastion went those that came from small Western towns and camps.

The idea of this was for the leading conspirators to get all, or nearly all, the moneyed letters, while deluded David would get little or nothing.

And the fair division of which Harrington talked would never be made.

Bastion might have suspected something if he had been less nervous, but he was frightened; he had a fool's confidence in Dike; and the latter had done the work with remarkable skill.

"So far, good!" uttered Dike, as he finished. "Now, each of you take home his share. Put what money you get in your own pockets, and

hide the useless letters in your house. I have a use for them in the future."

So he had—at least for David's share. If the Bastions refused to deal with him, so that he could get the secret to subdue Czarina, he intended to take revenge and have the sheriff find the stolen letters in Dave's possession.

The latter young man had run his neck into more danger that night than he could get out of in many days to come. Better for him had he restricted his genius for mischief to black-mailing helpless old men.

"Now for home," added Harrington, rising.

"Shall we show ourselves to-morrow?" asked David.

"Why shouldn't we?"

"They may suspect us."

"Nonsense! They'll suspect us if we don't show ourselves. We all want to go to the post-office as soon as we get home, and get our letters put away, and wait for the mail with the rest."

"I hadn't dare ter!" stammered Bastion.

"Bah! you ain't going to show the white feather, are you?"

"No," answered David, flushing. "I'll be around to-morrow, all right, and bold as a lion."

A cynical smile crossed Harrington's face, but Judah Mardwin frowned thoughtfully. As they started homeward he found chance to speak privately to Dike.

"Harrington," he said, "I'm afraid of our partner!"

"Why so?"

"He may betray us."

"Never fear; he's a fool, but he won't peach."

"I don't fear he will, intentionally; what I distrust is his cowardice. He will carry around a face like a sheet, and its pallor will attract attention. Then let some one question him and he will go to pieces."

"Pshaw! have no fear, Mardwin. The boy is a fool, as I said before, but when his own neck is in danger he has sand enough to keep a secret."

"Well, I hope so," Judah doubtfully replied.

CHAPTER XXXII.

PLANNING NEW RASCALITY.

THE three men separated when near the village and each went the way which led to his home.

The booty had been secured, but David Bastion was by no means in a happy frame of mind. He did a good deal of skulking on his way to Perham's, but, despite this, he met two persons by chance, and he thought they looked at him suspiciously. The stolen letters seemed heavy to him, and only the hope of getting a good deal of money out of them kept up his spirits.

He had already settled what should be done with them. Harrington had ordered that they should be preserved, and as Dave knew no suitable place where he could put them, and have them safe, he proposed giving them to his mother.

From the latter he expected a severe reprimand when it was known that he had turned road-agent. Esther had no conscience, but he believed she would disapprove strongly of his putting his neck in such danger.

This, however, would not deprive him of her aid. The deed was done, and Esther would be eager to shield her son. No one would think of suspecting her of being one of the robbers, and the safest place for the letters was in her hands.

Harrington and Mardwin were old hands at crime, and they were troubled with no such thoughts as they went away. To take an outside party into their confidence would, in their opinion, have been the height of madness, and they did not intend to have a trace of the robbery left, an hour later, which could connect them with it.

The course of both was the same when they reached a place of safety. In the privacy of his room each sat down and rapidly opened his share of the letters. No attempt was made to read those which proved to have no inclosure of financial value, and the few that had money inside received only casual notice.

On the whole the financial harvest was disappointing. Enough money was obtained to enable them to sit down to a game of poker, and that was about all.

When the "mail was assorted," as Harrington facetiously expressed it, every scrap of worthless paper was burned and the ashes scattered so that they could tell no tales. Only the money remained.

Thus, while David Bastion had one-third of the letters, with orders to preserve them carefully, the remaining two-thirds had gone forever from the sight of men; and while David had in his possession the means by which his treacherous partners in crime could ruin him if they saw fit, they would have borne a rigid scrutiny and come to no harm through it.

They had picked up David for a fool, and he had filled the bill admirably.

When Mardwin's share of the work was done he walked to the post-office to meet Harrington,

according to agreement, but the latter stopped him at the door and took him aside.

"There's mischief afoot!" he answered.

"How so?"

"I'll tell soon. First, let me say that the folks are beginning to wonder why the stage don't come."

"Naturally; it is an hour late."

"Yes; but it is frequently late. They don't suspect trouble yet. I have some notion that I am watched!"

"What! so soon?"

"Oh! it's on a different lay. You see, I've had somewhat of a row with that Saddle-Chief Kit, and he threatened that wherever I went I should be dogged by one of his men, and not allowed to leave Si Gotch."

"Why didn't you bore Jameson?"

"To be frank, he and I have tried conclusions, and he has proved himself the better man. The confession comes hard, but so it is. Well, when he set his watch-dogs on me, I got into a panic—more fool I!—but it was only a bluff. The watch-dogs soon let up. Since I went to the post-office this time, however, I've seen some signs that I am dogged again."

"That's bad."

"I reckon it won't amount to much."

"Suppose they saw you have the letters?"

"No fear of that. How did your mail pan out?"

Notes were compared on this point, and, for a wonder, both men told the truth. Then Dike abruptly added:

"Now for the mischief that is in the air. Your scheme is in danger!"

"What one?"

"The idea of having Pembroke implicated in the stage-robbery."

"Malediction!"

"When I promised you that one of my men should gobble on to Pembroke, and keep him for the evening where he could prove no *alibi*, I had selected a good man, and one Pembroke imagines is his friend. My man did his best, but he slipped up."

"How?"

"First thing he knew, somebody else had Pembroke in charge—namely, Miss Jessie Hollis."

Mardwin scowled fiercely.

"Curse the luck!" he exclaimed.

"They met outside the village, and there they walked, arm in arm, until my man was tired out."

"Then the jig is up."

"How so?"

"Pembroke can prove an *alibi* by Jessie."

"Not if you are shrewd."

"What can I do?"

"Kidnap the girl!"

"Zounds! Can it be done?"

"Just like a fly. The men here who look up to me with reverence stand ready to do whatever job I name—and pay them for. What will be easier than to go to the Hollis house and seize the fair Jessie during the night?"

"It is easier to plan than to do."

"Tis clear you are not such an old head at crime as I am. Let me go with you, and plan the thing, and I'll guarantee a success. To-morrow morning Jessie will be missing, and when Hall Pembroke is charged with the robbery of the stage, where will he get his *alibi*? He can't get it; the girl and my man are the only two persons who can prove that he was elsewhere than on the Cobble Camp trail. One won't be at hand to talk; t'other can talk, but won't!"

"Egad! there's something in your schemes, Dyckman, and I reckon I'll test it. By the way, it is odd that Jessie happened to be walking outside the village after dark. I never knew her to leave her invalid mother at such an hour."

"Possibly she had some one to take her place."

"Very likely."

"Well, Judah, is it a go?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll go and make ourselves seen at the post-office so as to avert suspicion, and some time before midnight I'll gather the kidnappers. I feel for you in this matter, Jude, for I have a contumacious lady-love myself."

"Czarina hasn't come to terms, eh?"

"Not a bit. By the way, she's left Si Gotch."

"Is that so?"

"Yes; gone to Belated Camp; and, confound the luck, that accursed Saddle-Chief Kit was her escort. I didn't see them go, but I heard of it. Brother rascal, I could cheerfully kill that so-called Centaur!"

"Why don't you?"

"He's too many guns for me. Twice, if you'll credit it, I have laid plans to have him slain off-hand, and my trustiest fellows were given the job; but the thing miscarried. Luck saved Jameson, and some change in his plans kept him out of the trap. I doubt if he suspects he has been in danger, but, be that as it may, he is still on deck, and he has gone to Belated Camp as the escort of my fair enslaver."

"Better run him into a snare like the one I've set for Pembroke."

"It's not in my line, and if I were you I'd use Pembroke as I mean to use Jameson."

"If I killed Pem it would be just like Jessie to adore his memory. Give a woman a chance to do a foolish, idiotic thing, and she'll do it."

"Yes. Strange that they can't be reasonable, like men. We, of the sensible sex, murder our rivals and cast off our lady-loves when we see a new charmer."

"As to Pembroke, he's a weak-minded chap, anyhow, and has been as much afraid of me as the devil is said to be of holy water. Pem still fears me, but he now has flashes of spirit which are not agreeable."

"We'll talk of this later. Let's go back to the post-office, and, anon, we'll kidnap your pretty Jessie."

Back went the plotters, little suspecting how the different subjects which they had mentioned might be connected.

They had spoken of abducting Jessie, and of the alleged journey of Czarina to Belated Camp; but had they known that the journey to Belated Camp was only a blind, and that, during the day, Czarina had made arrangements to stay secretly with Jessie Hollis, they might have suspected who remained with Mrs. Hollis while Jessie walked with Hall Pembroke; and it might also have dawned upon them that if they went to the Hollis cottage they would find more than one young lady.

When they reached the post-office again, they found that a feeling of uneasiness was beginning to exist. Pete Jordan had never before been so late in landing the stage at Si Gotch, and as the trail was in many places dangerous, there were some who were giving opinions of a serious nature.

Dyckman and Judah mixed freely with the crowd for half an hour.

Many eyes were watching for the stage, but it did not come, and patience became exhausted at last. It was agreed that something serious had happened to Pete Jordan, and half a dozen men got their horses and started to investigate.

Harrington did not go with this party, but Mardwin was determined to know the exact condition under which Pete and the stage were found; so he saddled up and galloped off with the rest.

The journey along the up-grade brought no discovery, but as they neared the scene of the assault, Judah made out the dark shape of the stage. His companions were not much behind him, and with a shout they rushed forward.

"Here's the team, anyhow!" cried Con Byrd, who was of the party.

"But whar's Pete?"

"The horses are loose."

"Thar's been foul play!" declared Con.

"Whar's Pete?"

"Whar's the mail?"

There was a medley of questions and exclamations, but the men had leaped to the ground, and all were eager to investigate. Suddenly another cry arose:

"Hyar's Pete, dead on the box!"

"Didn't I tell ye thar'd been foul play?" asked Con.

"Pete ain't dead, but he's senseless. Git out yer whisky-flasks, fellers!"

Every man produced the desired article, but it was wisely decided that Pete did not need many quarts of the beverage. A lantern had been brought along, and by its light they worked intelligently. Pete was taken under treatment, and the lantern used for other purposes.

The traces was cut!" announced one man.

"And the mail is gone!" added another.

"I reckon Si Gotch ain't goin' ter git left when we consider road-agents!" declared Con Byrd proudly. "Boys, ef Pete don't die, this will be a big night fur us—we kin have road-agents as well as any other place. Say, we've all got liquid terror; let's wash out our throats. Mine's full o' dust; it ought ter be washed out, an', by sixty! it shall be washed out!"

This sentiment was grateful to most of the crowd, and the dust was carefully looked to, but one of the party who was not thirsty made a new discovery just then.

"A revolver!" he exclaimed, picking something up from the ground. "Say, was this Pete's or the robbers'? Hold the light!"

The order was obeyed.

"It's marked 'H. P.', an' by sin, I know the weepion! It's Hall Pembroke's the blacksmith. Say, you chaps, it strikes me this is an artom suspicious!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"KILL! KILL!"

It was the next forenoon, and a hammer was ringing lustily in Hall Pembroke's shop as Judah Mardwin came down the street. There was an evil smile on the man's face, but he sauntered into the shop with his usual nonchalance.

"Hullo, Pem! you're hard at work, I see!" he said, in a hearty voice.

The blacksmith looked up, and a frown gathered upon his face as he saw who his visitor was. He was fashioning a piece of metal heated to a white hue, and, without a word of reply, he lowered his gaze and renewed his sturdy blows.

"I've heard that you've had company," pursued Judah.

Still there was no reply.

"What did Quinn have to say?" added Mardwin, as unmoved as ever.

Pembroke ceased his work.

"You are like a buzzard," he answered, in a deep voice. "Whenever there is trouble you scent it in the air and gather to torture the weak and helpless!"

"Bless me, Pem, what's all this about? I shall have to ask, later, but, just now, I have another question. I hear that your revolver was found by the robbed stage, and that Sheriff Quinn called to see you about it. I'm glad you're not under arrest, Pem!"

"You speak falsely!" retorted the blacksmith, in hot anger.

"Come, now, Pem, that's a trifle tough on an old friend like me—"

"Silence!" thundered Pembroke. "I won't hear any more of your infamous talk. You have come to taunt me about my new misfortune. Don't lie!"

"Well, I would like to know how you explain the fact that your revolver was found there."

"The weapon was stolen from me two days ago."

"Quinn let you off on that excuse, eh?"

"He let me remain on my parole of honor."

"Pem, you're the luckiest dog I ever knew. Your revolver was stolen two days ago! Old man, that excuse is so old that its teeth have fallen out."

"It was no excuse; it was the truth. Beware how you insinuate, Judah Mardwin!—I have borne all I can from you. As for the revolver, I am not sure but you know more about it than I do. I suspected you when the silver was found in my shop; I suspect you now. The revolver would not have been left at the scene of robbery without a motive. The motive was to criminate me. Who except you would wish me ill?"

"Pem, you're talking outrageously!" returned Mardwin, with an injured air.

"I am talking to the point. I warn you that I am not blind, and you will suffer if I am brought to injury through you!"

Sternly and warningly the blacksmith faced his enemy, and it was plain that he was in no mood for trifling, or for easy-going measures. Judah began to wish that he had not come. Hall Pembroke in a bold, defiant mood was not the Hall Pembroke he took pleasure in taunting. Before he could make answer, however, another man entered the shop. It was Tyrington Perham, and he was in a state of great agitation—so great that he did not notice Mardwin.

"Pembroke!" he cried, "have you heard the news?"

"What news, sir?"

"Jessie Hollis has been abducted!"

"What!" cried the blacksmith, in a loud voice.

"Jessie is gone. Unknown men entered the cottage last night and kidnapped her!"

"Where is she now?"

"It is not known. I came at once to tell you when I learned of it. The house was entered by tampering with a window, and Jessie taken away without an alarm. Czarina, who was stopping with her, is gone too!"

Pembroke did not hear the last words. He turned upon Judah Mardwin with his face distorted with fury.

"Demon!" he exclaimed, "this is your work!"

"You wrong me, Pem—"

"Add no more lies to your list. You have passed the limit of my forbearance; you shall pay the penalty. Only a moment ago I warned you not to press me to the wall again. Scoundrel!—fiend in human shape!—you shall pay for all this!"

The blacksmith caught up his discarded hammer, and the expression on his face filled Perham with horror. Pembroke saw him not, but he saw another shape than Judah Mardwin's hated form. Before his eyes seemed to float the red mist, and within it stood that thing not of earth—the mysterious *Tempter*—and its finger pointed to Mardwin and its lips pantomimed the old command—"*Kill! kill!*"

"I hear!" shouted Pembroke, madly; "I hear, and I will obey. Mardwin, your race is run; your hour has come. I will *kill!—kill!*"

Swinging the hammer aloft he sprang forward, determined in his dread purpose, but terror seized upon Mardwin. With a hoarse, startled cry he dashed at full speed toward the door, and as he went he heard the heavy footsteps of his would-be slayer behind him. He fled, but his own speed would not have saved him then. He was nearer death than ever before, but the pursuit was interrupted.

Tyrington Perham, sick at heart with horror, retained presence of mind which made amends for all his weakness of the past. Youthful agility seemed to return to his aged limbs, and one of his hands grasped Pembroke's arm before the latter could cross the threshold.

"Stop, Hall Pembroke!" he commanded, solemnly. "In the name of the over-ruling Providence, I bid you stop!"

His grasp was only that of a child in comparison to the sturdy blacksmith's, but even at that critical moment the ascendancy of mind which he had always exercised over Pembroke

did not desert him. Nothing else—unless, perhaps, the voice of Jessie Hollis—could have checked that headlong pursuit; but, deaf and blind though Hall Pembroke was to the things of earth in their true form, that voice penetrated to his darkened understanding and stayed his steps.

He wavered—hesitated—paused!

"Be calm, my friend, be calm!" added Perham, and his kind old face was full of lofty strength and pity.

"He has passed the limit of forbearance," huskily replied the blacksmith.

"Leave him to the just God who knoweth his every act. Oh! my dear friend, seek not to right a wrong with another wrong! Let the light of Divine wisdom shine in upon your tortured mind! Carry your afflictions to One who is able to help you."

"I have spared the man too long."

"Would you stain your hands with the blood of such an ignoble man?"

"Sooner or later, it must come to that."

"I tell you it must not. Yield not to the impulse which is upon you; be strong; be manly."

"Am I to stand idle and let him ruin me?"

"He shall not. I will stand between you and his evil plots."

"He caused the silver to be concealed in this shop to prove me guilty of the robbery; he had the revolver left where the stage was robbed to have suspicion fall upon me; and now he has stolen Jessie. I know he has done all this—am I to endure it tamely?"

"You are to meet him firmly, as an innocent man should, and I will help you."

"He is bound to ruin me, and now Jessie is gone. Great heavens! do you realize what that means?"

"I do, but the evil-doers shall be circumvented. My own Czarina is abducted, too, but the stoutest of hearts is enlisted in her behalf. Kit Jameson swears that the girls shall be rescued and the guilty men punished."

Perham had accomplished his purpose at last; he had engaged Pembroke in consultation until he was again calm. The blacksmith tossed his hammer aside.

"Jessie demands all my care," he observed, in a steady voice. "I will forget all else until she is rescued. How was she taken?"

"It is not fully known. As you are aware, Czarina stayed with Mrs. Hollis while Jessie walked with you last evening. When Jessie returned the two girls spent some time with Mrs. Hollis and then retired, they occupying the same room. In the morning Jessie did not come as usual to her mother, but it was not until a neighbor called that the abduction was discovered."

"Was any clew left?"

"No. The kidnappers entered by forcing a window open, and, after that, seem to have met with no trouble. It is very sad, indeed. I pity Mrs. Hollis most of all, but rejoice to say she is bearing it nobly. She asserts that Jessie will be recovered unharmed."

"Where is Jameson?"

"I left him at the cottage."

"I'll go there at once and lend my aid—unless I am arrested."

"For the stage-robbery?"

"Yes."

"Sheriff Quinn believes you innocent."

"Others may not do so."

The minister did not reply. He knew that public feeling was strongly against the blacksmith. Coming so soon after the bank-robbery, a strong case seemed to be made out against Pembroke, and the people of Si Gotch were almost unanimous in the opinion that he ought to be arrested.

They blamed Quinn for not locking him up at once, but the sheriff was an obstinate man. He had adopted the idea that there was a conspiracy against Pembroke, and he would not arrest him.

Pete Jordan, the stage-driver, had not recovered consciousness, and could give no information to aid the investigation.

Pembroke threw on his coat, and they went at once to the Hollis cottage. Hall was in deep thought during the journey, but Perham noticed that dark glances were cast upon him by all they met. The minister breathed a silent prayer for his friend.

When Mrs. Hollis's house was reached they found Kit Jameson in conversation with a man who was a stranger to them.

"What news?" Perham asked.

"Our rescue-party will soon start."

"Have you any idea which way to go?"

"I have a theory. Here is Mr. Pembroke; I am glad to meet you, sir, and regret that Miss Hollis has met with trouble for another's sake."

"I don't understand," Pembroke replied.

"The attack was aimed at Miss King."

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"It was aimed at Jessie, and Judah Mardwin was at the bottom of it all. Such is my firm conviction."

"There may be something in it," the Centaur replied, thoughtfully, "but I have the best of proof that Dyckman Harrington led the kidnappers. He and Mardwin may have joined

hands to do the deed. I suppose you are with us in the pursuit, Pembroke?"

"Most certainly. Let me see Mrs. Hollis a moment, after which I will be ready."

The blacksmith went into the house. Saddle-Chief Kit nodded to Perham.

"That's the safest way," he remarked.

"What way?"

"For him to go. If he don't he may get into a blamed fix here. The people are hot because Quinn persists in not arresting Pembroke, and I'm a bit afraid his life is in danger. At the best they will seize him and introduce him to prison, and what I fear is that Judge Lynch will mount the bench."

"Merciful heavens! are the men of Si Gotch so lost to all human feeling?"

"Men will be men, parson, and I give it as my opinion that, take 'em anywhere, they're a mighty poor lot!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"MADAM, PACK YOUR TRUNK AND GO!"

HALL PEMBROKE came out of the cottage.

"Hadn't we better be off at once?" he asked.

"Very soon," Kit replied; "but I am waiting for word from a man whom I expect at once. In the meanwhile, Mr. Perham, we will attend to that job at your house."

"What job?"

"The 'firing' of the Bastions!"

"Would it be well for us to delay—"

"It is no delay. Trust me, if you will, and I'll arrange all for the best. Those pernicious barnacles on the hull of the parsonage ought to be excoriated, excommunicated, expelled and extinguished. We'll do it at once. Face to the front! Come on!"

Speaking nonchalantly, Kit turned his face toward the parsonage and walked off, with Perham and Pembroke by his side. The minister was in a state of mingled eager anticipation and fear, but the latter predominated, and as they neared the door, he observed:

"I think I'll let you do the talking, Mr. Jameson."

"Quite right. My vocal organs are equal to the demands of the occasion, and I promise to give the female Bastion no quarter."

They entered the house, and Perham was about to send Harp Moy to request the presence of Esther, when that lady suddenly appeared. The men had entered the sitting-room, and she came in without being aware of their presence. She gave them a supercilious look, but the Centaur was not in the least abashed.

"Mrs. Bastion," said he, calmly, "I am a real estate agent, and have control over the Reverend Mr. Perham's tenants. As such I give you permission to move out, and name fifteen minutes as the time allowed you to go in!"

Esther's eyes glittered. She comprehended at once that her position in the house was menaced, but she did not intend to go. She ignored Kit and looked at Perham.

"What's this I hear?" she demanded.

"My voice may have been audible to you," serenely returned the Centaur. "Your visit is up here; you can go!"

"I shan't go!" declared Esther.

"Opinions differ. We prefer not to be severe with a—by George! I almost said, 'with a lady!'—with a female, I mean; but your visit is up. Madam, pack your trunk and go!"

"Parson, do you uphold this wretch in what he is saying?" demanded Esther, hotly.

"Mr. Jameson speaks with my full approval," answered the minister, somewhat faintly.

"And I am ordered to go?"

"Ye-es."

"Does it take three men ter put out one woman?"

"It takes one man," tersely replied Kit, "to eject the whole Bastion brood, and that man is I!"

"I am talkin' with Tyrington Perham; I have nothin' ter say ter ruffians. Perham, you da'ssen't send me off!"

"You're going, just the same!" Kit assented.

"If any one dares merlest me, I have a secret the hull world shall know!"

Esther's face was red and purple with rage, and her eyes glittered like a snake's. She had shot a venomous look toward Kit, but he remained unmoved.

"Miss King is away," he answered, "and your secret is of no value. You can tell it all you wish. Miss King was sent away from here to get her out of your reach. She is gone, and your shadowy hold here has gone with her. Your power has gone, madam, and you had better amble along after it. Your room is better than your company; pack up and go!"

"Wait until my son, David, comes, an' you'll see—"

"We decline to wait for him or any other reptile, but if your son, David, is on the fight, I shall be overjoyed to see him at any time. Tell David to call around, Mrs. Bastion! Let him bring any weapon from a horse-whip and a revolver up to a cannon and a dynamite bomb. He and I can have lots of fun together—if he is on his fight!"

The Centaur nodded and smiled in his most amiable way, but suddenly arose.

"Madam," he sharply added, "your time is fast wearing away. Your infamous reign in this house is over, and the sooner you get out, the better. You have next to no baggage, and you and your daughter can carry it to the hotel, or wherever you see fit to go; but no one named Bastion can stay here longer. In the name of our host I order you to go!"

"Perham, you hadn't dare ter do this!" faltered Mrs. Bastion, alarmed at last.

"I have—I do!"

"I'll spread the secret ter the four winds."

"As you see fit."

Perham spoke with a degree of firmness which was not promising, but Esther knew the value of maintaining her position in the house if possible.

"Would you destroy Czarina's happiness?" she asked.

"I trust she will yet be happy."

"With me as her mother?"

Perham moved uneasily.

"I shall claim my child legally," Esther added.

"Thank Heaven! she is of age!"

"Anyhow, folks shall know all about it."

"Beware how you go too far. You have no influence in this town; I have."

"A coward's arguerment!" snapped Esther.

"It will not be cowardly to defend Czarina from the attacks of a vicious woman."

"I think that will do," interpolated Kit. "We are not here to argue, but to send the Bastion tribe away. Woman, there is to be no more idle talk here! You are ordered to go, and if you do not obey, you will be forcibly ejected from the house. Mercy is out of place with a poisonous reptile. There is the door. Go!"

"I could kill you!" hissed Esther, now pale with rage and disappointment.

"No doubt, if you were able; but you are not."

"I'll have my revenge, yet!"

"Take all you can get, woman; but, by heavens! you shall vent your venom no more here!"

He advanced with quick steps, and Mrs. Bastion retreated to the door.

"We will go—me an' my poor Pansy—but you would not da's ter act so ef we was men. We have no desire ter stay in a house which harbors hypocrite parsons an' ignorant ruffians. Yes; we'll go; but we'll have revenge. Mark that down!"

Uttering these words while her eyes flashed with impotent fury, she retreated up the stairs.

Kit had heard of her appropriation of Czarina's jewels, and determined not to let the women steal anything now. He called Mrs. Granger, and, together, they followed Esther. There was nothing for the two women to do except to put a few minor articles into a valise—their sole worldly goods—and Kit sent the housekeeper into their room to make sure that they packed nothing else.

Once more Esther stormed, and Pansy added her venom, but they were beating against a rock. Kit could be as firm as any other man, and, knowing how they had persecuted Czarina and Mr. Perham, he had no pity for them.

The minister and Pembroke had remained down stairs, and the former soon had the pleasure of seeing his departing guests descend.

Esther shook her clinched hand at him.

"We're goin'," she hissed, "but you'll see that we'll be revenged. By noon the secret shall be all over Si Gotch, which will humble that girl o' yours; an' then we'll look ter you. I won't rest till I see you drove out o' town, ruined an' disgraced. I swear it!"

"Accept our thanks!" Kit responded.

She gave him a malevolent glance.

"You'll come in fur your share!" she said, bitterly.

"Thanks! I had been afraid you'd slight me. Well, madam, farewell, adios, vale and all the rest!"

The women were outside the house. Esther tried to say more, but she was choking with passion, and she let it go. Slowly she and Pansy moved down the street.

"All serene!" Kit remarked.

"Mr. Jameson, how can I ever thank you?" warmly answered Perham, as he grasped the Centaur's hand.

"Consider it done already, and let's sit down and wait a bit. I've left word to have news brought to me here—"

Harp Moy timidly approached.

"Clan I speakee with you?" he asked.

"Say right on, Moy!"

"It is plivate."

"Oh! in that case, we'll go to one side. Probably, Perham, he aspires to know the Eastern market price of rice."

With this surmise Kit followed the Chinaman, and the latter began when at a safe distance.

"Miss Czarina is gone?" he asked, opening his eyes widely.

"I regret to say she is."

"You remember the nightie in the Plits?"

"Yes."

"The g'lostees have gotee her!"

"The g'hosts! How is that?"

"Samee as live in the Plits."

"You've been in the Plits, I remember, and it

may be you have an idea or two. What is it? Out with it!"

"I wentee to the Plits with her to see-ee the spirirts. She their fiend, then; they getee her now."

"Harp Moy, elucidate. Tell me all you know."

"I plomise her I no tellee, but she not knowee how things happen. Me tellee all."

Moy had duly considered the case and was prepared to make a clean breast of it. He told of the night expedition to the Plits—how Czarina had summoned him and given him the basket to carry; how they had progressed in their mysterious journey, greatly to his alarm; and how they had finally come to a "demon" who lived in a hut. Here, according to his account, Czarina had given tribute to the monster. Apparently, she was either his friend or in his power, and Harp Moy argued that she had at last been seized by the demon and his allies.

Saddle-Chief Kit had always been greatly perplexed to account for Czarina's presence in the Plits the night of his adventure on the ledge, and although, after her expressed wish for secrecy, he had heretofore refrained from investigating, he now thought himself justified in learning all he could.

He questioned the Chinaman closely, and was soon in possession of all the facts known to Harp Moy.

Kit was perplexed. Lacking Moy's superstition, he did not believe in demons of the kind mentioned, and he readily perceived that Czarina had visited a living man in the hut. Who was he?

This was a most difficult question to answer. Brave as Czarina was, she had always been one with a great regard for the proprieties of life; no one in Si Gotch could name a rash, unwomanly act of hers. What, then, was the secret of the Plits?

Kit wrestled with this puzzle for some time, but he could not see that it bore upon her abduction; so he cautioned Harp Moy to mention it to no one else, and determined to let the matter rest there for awhile.

At this point Perham appeared and announced that there was some one at the door who wished to see him. He went, and found the giant who had once stood in Dike Harrington's way when that man tried to leave Si Gotch.

"All right!" announced the stranger.

"Have you the clew?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll be off. Hasten to the hotel and have the horses made ready. Perham, we have the thread necessary to follow Czarina, and we are off on the trail. You had better stay here, but I leave one promise to keep up your courage. Czarina shall be returned to you in safety. I promise that!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

HUNTING HUMAN GAME.

It was not long before the rescue-party was in motion. It was composed of seven men, among them being Kit, Pembroke, Con Byrd and the giant. The others were strangers, but were understood to be friends of the Centaur. Tyrington Perham was reluctant to stay behind, but he was a very poor horseman, and knew that he had no right to force himself upon the party.

Before they left, Kit told the minister in an undertone that they had definite tidings from the abductors, and it was believed they would soon be run down.

The giant—who was called Driver—led the way, while Con Byrd fell in beside Kit.

"I've took the liberty," he observed, "ter arm your dashin' fightin'-critters."

"To arm them?"

"With spiritual endurance. It stands ter reason that a hard ride on a dry road will be tryin', it'll fill their throats with dust, an' as said dust ought ter be washed out, I've supplied the needful fur the wash!"

Con threw back one side of his coat and revealed the neck of a suspicious-looking bottle.

"Liquid p'ison!" he added, with a grin.

"Your medicine may come in good play before we get back to Si Gotch, but don't go for the dust too often."

"I'll try ter keep it out by an ounce of prevention," Con answered, as he took a drink from the flask.

Driver led the way rapidly. He and the other friends of the Centaur were old border-men who being near, had come to Si Gotch after the attempt on Kit's life, and though the latter at first resented what he regarded as an intimation that he was unable to care for himself, he had consented and put them to practical use.

Their latest work had been to look for the abductors' trail, and Driver had followed it to a point where it could readily be kept in sight from the saddle.

Past Mount Lookout's rugged base rode the rescuers, galloping when possible, and a distance of two miles was soon covered. This was as far as the trail had been followed, and extra care now became necessary.

Saddle-Chief Kit, who was the equal of any man of his years at prairie-craft, rode to Driver's side and they went on together. There was a table-land ahead of them which, free from stones and chasms, was yet quite undulating and covered with irregular groups of trees.

One fact soon impressed itself upon Kit's mind.

"The kidnappers did not make much haste," he remarked.

"No," Driver responded.

"What do you argue from that?"

"Plenty o' time, I reckon."

"There must be more to it,"

"What more?"

"They had a definite plan, and were not anxious to get far away. Had they been they would have galloped fast and far through the night."

"They may be full o' bravado."

"They were full of something else, in my opinion. Dike Harrington is a cautious man, as well as tolerably level-headed. I infer that he had the flight carefully planned, and did not need much time. Looks to me as though we should find our lost ladies carefully secreted, rather than taken far away."

"Your head ain't a bad 'un, Kit, an' it may be you're right; I won't go ag'in' you. Howsoever, it won't do no harm ter git over the ground as fast as we kin."

"Nor ter wash the dust out o' our throats now an' then," added Con Byrd, jovially.

The trail was not hard to follow, for the prairie grass was tall, and five miles more were left behind. Then the rescuers had a surprise. Emerging from a belt of timber they saw several horses a few rods in advance, and that they were those of Harrington's party was evident when they were recognized as those stolen from Si Gotch during the night.

But where were the men?

Kit gave the word, and his party made a dash to surround the immediate vicinity. They did this and then closed in, but the contraction of their lines showed nothing within but the horses.

No human beings were to be seen.

The trailers looked at each other sheepishly.

"Duped!" exclaimed Driver.

"There's a trick somewhere, and we are on the wrong track. Where is the loose screw? Boys, there is one less horse here than made tracks along the trail. Where is he? Scatter and look!"

The order was promptly obeyed, and discoveries followed. The trail of the missing horse was found leading away due north, and from that point he had been ridden at full speed. A careful examination of the back-trail led to a conclusion upon which all agreed.

Only one of the horses had been ridden, and the others had undoubtedly been conducted by a single man. A trick had been played upon the trailers. The party they sought had at some point abandoned their animals and taken to a refuge by the way, while one of their number had taken their riderless horses along to make a decoy trail, abandoning them permanently at the point where they were found.

This was a dampener upon Kit and his friends, for no end of trouble might arise from it. Wherever the fugitives had found refuge, it was only reasonable to suppose that they had taken every possible precaution, and if they were experienced bordermen, it might be exceedingly difficult to find them.

Saddle-Chief Kit, however, leaped to a conclusion.

"In my opinion, they should be looked for in the Bottomless Pits region," he announced.

"Wild as the country is, there is no other place as wild as that. I believe they are nearer Si Gotch, now, than we are to them."

"It's pooty tough on us ter be sold," answered Driver, with an air of deep mortification; "but it's a long road that ain't got a turnin'. We're in the swim, an' ef we don't find 'em yet, I want my dog-goned head pounded!"

"Le's wash the dust out o' our throats an' go fur them like a cyclone!" suggested Con Byrd.

Nothing could dampen the speaker's high spirits, but Kit Jameson, though he kept up a cool outward show, was not in a happy mood. Peculiar as his wooing had been, he had as strong a fancy for Czarina as men usually acquire in such short time, and he was troubled about her. She was in the hands of lawless men, and if they had succeeded in blinding the trail well, it might be some time before she and Jessie would be found.

There was only one thing to do; and that was to retrace their steps and try to penetrate the kidnappers' trick. The professional pride of the borderers was aroused, and they turned back in a determined mood—a mood dangerous, too, to Dike Harrington and his comrades.

Kit took opportunity to speak encouragingly to Hall Pembroke. The latter was almost unnerved by the check to the pursuit. He was not a trailer, and he had to rely upon the others; and this gave him ample time for melancholy forebodings.

He pictured Jessie in danger, surrounded by her lawless captors, and the expression upon his

face aroused all of Kit's pity. He put aside his own fears to console Pembroke, and the latter's gratitude knew no limits.

Along the backward trail went the party, and the skillful bordermen were on their nerve. Mile after mile was retraced, but still nothing was seen to warrant a halt. The opinion became general that the fugitives must be looked for in the Bottomless Pits.

What would be the result of a search there no one could say. Nobody knew anything about that desolate area, and hidiers and seekers would be on equal footing.

The energy of the trailers bore fruit in the end. When they reached the northern side of the Pits they found where the party had separated. Efforts had been made to blind the trail, but they were so clumsy that it at once became clear that no experienced head was among the kidnappers. In spite of all precautions, it was comparatively easy to trace them to the edge of the Pits region, and the footprints of two women showed that Czarina and Jessie had been kept together.

Kit and his friends now necessarily abandoned their horses, and the search was continued on foot. It was a grim, determined-looking party. Each man carried his rifle ready for use, and his belt bristled with small-arms.

The mere sight of the rescuers would have frightened timid fugitives out of their wits.

System became out of the question. The numerous ledges, cliffs, canyons and crevices, crossing and recrossing each other at all angles, made the work slow and hard, but if the trail was lost at one point, they spread out and recovered it further on.

The sun had been at the zenith when they left their horses, and while it seemed to sink with unusual speed down the northern sky, the progress of the trailers was painfully slow. Once, the trail seemed utterly lost, and was only recovered after an hour's search. The Pits area did not belie its reputation, and Driver, a man of long experience, declared that he had never followed "signs" under more unfavorable circumstances.

The passage of time brought new trouble, for night advanced with relentless steps. The sun neared the Western horizon, and already the shadows began to gather in the gulches. Up in the region more favored by nature it would be light for two hours, but the area where lay the trail had laws of its own.

The difficulty of working became greater, and the men gathered on a cliff to consult. When there Kit grew abstracted. He faced away from his friends and dropped out of the discussion altogether, a fact which finally arrested Driver's attention.

"Do you see anything?" asked the big borderman.

"No."

"What's up, then?"

"Will you use your nostrils and see if you smell anything peculiar?"

Each of the other men did so, but all failed to discover any unusual odor.

"Either my olfactory organs are better than yours, or I am deceived," Kit announced. "I smell smoke!"

"Bars an' buff'lers! it must be looked ter!" Driver declared. "Whar away? Let's beat her up!"

All caught at the idea, and, the wind having been diagnosed, they pressed forward rapidly. It had grown too dark to discern the faint trail, and it was wholly abandoned, but the new clew was promising. On they went, and not many rods had been covered before all could smell the smoke.

A discovery of some sort was at hand, and they became more eager than ever, but the necessity of caution did not escape their minds. They finally halted, and Kit and Driver went on to investigate.

They were gone but little over five minutes, and when they returned, their manner told a part of the story before they spoke.

"Beyond doubt, we have 'em!" the Centaur announced. "A small fire is burning among the rocks—just enough, probably, to cook supper—and I distinctly saw a man not a stranger to me. I have seen him with Harrington at Si Gotch. We also saw other figures indistinctly, and are almost positive that a part of them are women. We are up with the gang, and will lose no time in making the attack. We'll creep as near as possible, and, when discovered, make a rush. There's no need of shedding blood if we can help it, but if they begin the work, do your level best, boys!"

"That's the idee!" declared Con Byrd. "Wash the dust out o' yer throats, fellers, an' then wade in!"

Anxious as Kit was to bring matters to a crisis, he would not object to this step, for his allies had done good service; but when those who were thirsty had satisfied themselves, they were as eager as the leaders.

Once more Kit led the way, and the light of the fire was soon seen shining dimly from among the rocks.

"Keep on!" directed the Centaur. "We shall probably have to fight for it, but let nothing knock us out of victory!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WHAT WAS FOUND UNDER THE TREE.

TYRINGTON PERHAM passed a restless, anxious night. No news had come from the rescue party, and his fears for Czarina's safety had rendered him painfully nervous. After breakfast he heard the first report.

A miner who had a hut some distance to the north came in and stated that he had heard firing in the Pits at dark the previous evening. He had come to ask what it meant, and the men of Si Gotch could think of but one explanation. They inferred that the kidnappers had been brought to bay there, and that a fight had occurred.

The fact that the rescuers had not appeared was not to be wondered at, for they would be foolish to try to get out of the Pits by night. No doubt they would soon arrive—if they had been the conquerors in the fight.

A rumor was current that Hall Pembroke had been seen near the village at daybreak, but it could not be traced to its source. It was generally disbelieved, but his worst enemies advanced the idea that he had deserted Kit's party. These enemies, too, saw Sheriff Quinn and demanded the blacksmith's arrest, and the official, obstinate as he was, perceived that he would be obliged to comply, or lose his position as Sheriff of Si Gotch.

When Mr. Perham heard the news about the firing he left Si Gotch and wandered toward the Pits. He had no intention of penetrating there, but wished to see the returning rescuers at the earliest possible moment.

It was but poor consolation to wander on the dividing-line, and look at the bleak rocks of the barren region, but the exercise was preferable to being shut up in the town, and, it must be confessed, he had some fear of remaining in his house while the Bastions were still on the scene.

He moved back and forth for some time without having any definite course. Several times he passed to the south of a certain tree, but, finally, varied his course and would have passed on the north had he not been brought to a halt by a startling sight.

Under the tree lay a man, and the first sight of him gave Perham a shock. The position of the body was not natural; it was not that which a living man would be likely to assume.

Conquering his natural emotion, the minister went forward, and the change of position gave him a clear and alarming view. The face of the man was ghastly white, except where it was spotted with blood, and a terrible tragedy was at once suggested to Perham's mind.

But the worst was yet to come. He took another step and saw that which seemed to actually chill his blood.

The man was Judah Mardwin!

Yes; white and cold Mardwin lay there with a wound in his temple which told how his life had gone out, and Perham knew that he stood upon the scene of a murder.

"Dead!" he uttered, in a whisper. "Dead, and by violence. What terrible secret is half-told here? The wages of sin is death! All his crimes and all his plots are over, and he has died in the midst of his sins. Oh! man, man, what a flickering flame is the breath which makes up your insignificant life, and how easily it is extinguished. Out of evil shall come good, and Hall Pembroke's great temptation is forever removed."

He started, paused, and the color fled from his face.

He had remembered the report that Pembroke had been seen near the village at daybreak that morning.

Another moment and he saw again, in imagination, the stalwart figure of the blacksmith with upraised hammer, ready to strike Mardwin. Had he struck then, he might have made a wound similar to that which had at last deprived the man of life.

Perham began to tremble like a leaf. Had all his efforts to save Pembroke from crime been unavailing? Had the enemies met, at last, and settled their feud? Had the pointing finger of the *Tempter*, and the pantomimic command of his silent lips been obeyed? Had the alleged fate been accomplished?

"Oh! my poor friend!" murmured Perham.

"May Heaven grant you are innocent of this!" He tried to believe that the blacksmith was innocent, but remembered the oft-repeated assertion of Pembroke that, sooner or later, he was destined to kill Mardwin, and that no power could avert it.

Perham was sick at heart, but, whether Pembroke was innocent or guilty, he had a duty to perform quickly. News of the murder must be conveyed to Sheriff Quinn, and he turned and walked quickly toward the town. Heavy, indeed, seemed the burden which rested upon him, and he grieved for the blacksmith as only one of his nature could.

No one else would ever know how Pembroke had been tempted, nor how he struggled against that temptation; and if the poor fellow ever stood at the bar, there would be few so poor as to give him pity.

His course to the village took him near his own house, and as he was passing, Mrs. Granger came hurrying out.

"Sir!" she exclaimed, breathlessly, "that woman is back!"

"What!"

"Esther Bastion and her girl are here, and she's brought Mr. Edwards and Mr. Stoughton with her."

"What does she want?"

"I don't exactly know, but I think you'd better come in, sir."

Perham thought so, too. The audacity of the Bastions in venturing to invade the house again stung him to the quick, and gave him courage quite new to him. He forgot his errand and marched into the house. He knew Edwards and Stoughton well—they were mine-owners—and was confident that they did not come as his enemies, unless Esther had lied greatly to them.

He entered the sitting-room and found the two gentlemen there, with Esther and her daughter as their companions. Mrs. Bastion's eyes flashed at sight of the minister, and her tongue moved at once.

"There he is!" she cried; "there he is, an' I ain't a-goin' ter submit ter outrage no longer. What I have endured nobody can tell. It's be'n outrageous, an' my maternal feelin's has been voylated an' trod under foot. I trust I am not a woman g'n ter brawlin' nor unseemly carryin's on, but even a saint will hold up her chin an' hev her rights when exasperatin'ly cut ter a vital part, which same is the heart. I've been meek an' long-sufferin' but I'm goin' ter speak out!"

She glared at Perham, defying opposition, but he waved his hand calmly.

"Proceed, Mrs. Bastion!"

"I hope, Mr. Perham, you won't misunderstand our presence here," began Edwards, anxiously; but Esther interrupted and drowned him out.

She had something to say; she was determined to say it; and no one made a single move to interrupt as she rattled off the story.

"My name was Esther Harkins when I was a gal, an' ef I do say it, thar wasn't many could take the shine out o' me; but I won't brag. An' at that time that man there—the lofty parson—used ter come courtin' me, an' he was sweet as honey, but he was too lank an' green fur me, an' I sent him flyin'. But that ain't my story."

She flashed a malevolent glance upon Perham, whose expression was one of mingled embarrassment and resignation, and continued:

"When I did marry it was a man named O'Brien, an' the parson knows it. O'Brien was a stranger in them parts, an' nobody knowed much about him, though all was mightily took with him. He picked me out from among all the gals, an' as I want so used ter villains as I be now—a vicious glance at Perham—"how was I ter know he was one? Wal, we was married, an' fur over a year things was all right; but a storm was a-brewin'. All o' a suddint down on ter us swooped some city officers, an' Patrick O'Brien was arrested. What d'ye think? He was a bank-burglar an' sneak-thief; an' had done time in Sing-Sing; an' he had a wife an' some sev'ral children afore he ever seen me. Wal, he was took away, sent ter prison an' died thar, but that ain't all."

"When he was arrested I had a baby-da'rter which was his child, too; and when I knowed how he was a criminal, an' had another legal wife, I was so flustered that I jest left the baby an' run away. 'Twa'n't right, but I was clean gone out o' my head."

"Wal, there was my baby left, an' it was destitute—poor, dear, sweet angel! What d'ye s'pose become on't? Why, young Parson Tyrington Perham took it—him an' his sister did—an' they adopted it an' brung it up. Yes, sirree, gents; an' the young lady who is called Czarina King ain't no right ter the name. She's my gal an' the sneak-thief's, an' ef she's got any name, it's Bridget O'Brien!"

The bitterest, most vindictive and most triumphant glance of all was flashed upon Perham, and then Esther added:

"I've married poor, dear Mr. Bastion since—now deceased—an' have two buds o' promise in my David an' my Pansy; but my mother's heart turns to my first-born. I have come here ter see my own, loved Bridget, but the ungrateful thing disowns me; an' that man Perham has driv' me out of this house like a pestilent viper. Gents, ef you know what a mother's heart is, you can faintly imagine what I have suffered!"

Having said all this most venomously Esther now rolled her eyes upward and tried to assume a saint-like expression, but the effort was a failure; the malignancy of her nature was plainly understood by all.

She had told her story and was ready for a bitter fight, but they were abruptly interrupted. Perham had heard voices, but he was taken entirely by surprise when the door of the sitting-room also opened and Sheriff Quinn walked in.

The intruder removed his hat.

"Hope you'll excuse me for coming in so unceremoniously, parson, but it's on official business. I have an arrest to make, and I don't believe you'll object. Mrs. Esther Bastion, you are my prisoner!"

The announcement fell with force upon all, but Quinn very nonchalantly added:

"If you'll pass over the stolen Government letters, woman, I'll carry them to the jail!"

Esther's red face had grown pale.

"What's that you say?" she demanded, sharply.

"Plain English, every word; but if you want more, you shall have your fill. You have in your possession sundry letters stolen by your son, David, and others, from Pete Judson's stage. You have become the holder of what you knew to be stolen, and, consequently, party to his crime. As I said before, you are my prisoner!"

"Have you really discovered who the stage-robbers were?" asked Edwards.

"Yes; the driver has recovered his senses, and though the robbers made an effort to hoodwink him then by calling out a bogus name—it was Hall Pembroke's—he recognized two of them then. The two were Dave Bastion and Dike Harrington. Pembroke is cleared on that score, just as I expected he would be. Mrs. Bastion, are you ready to go to jail?"

"I don't know what you are talkin' about. I'm an innocent woman an' I won't be touched. I ain't got no letters, nor my boy, David, ain't. The dear child wouldn't do sech a thing. It's all a lie—"

Almost crazed with fright and dismay, Esther was fast nearing a raving point, but Quinn interrupted her:

"Denial is natural, but it will do no good. Dave Bastion, himself, has owned up. Will you surrender quietly, or shall I call my men?"

"I'll kill the fust man who touches me!" screamed the half-maddened woman. "You lie when you say my David has confessed; he never did it, an' is too good ter do it!"

"A mother's son always is, but, like a good many of the kind, David is a rascal. Parson Perham, this scene may be too painful for you. If you'll go to your study, I'll join you there soon."

Mr. Perham, bewildered and shocked, was glad to escape, and, standing not upon the order of his going, he made haste to obey. Well did he know the sheriff had said correctly when he stated that a painful scene was about to occur.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SURPRISES MULTIPLY.

THE minister had barely reached his study when he heard the sound of a struggle in the sitting-room, and when a scream of rage followed, he discreetly stopped his ears with his hands and remained thus until Quinn entered.

"All done!" quoth the sheriff, coolly. "She is a tigress, and she fought like one, but her day is over."

"Has David really confessed the robbery?"

"Yes; and what is more, the young man is in a bad way. He and Judah Mardwin, the third robber, met outside the village last night and quarreled. According to Dave's story he taxed Judah with double-dealing, and they came to blows. It was literally a death-struggle; Mardwin was killed outright, and Bastion hurt so badly he could barely crawl away. He was found helpless, and as he thinks he is going to die, has fallen into a panic and confessed all his misdeeds."

"Was it really he who killed Judah Mardwin?" cried Perham, eagerly.

"Yes; he confesses it."

"Thank Heaven!" uttered Perham, fervently.

It was not an exclamation of rejoicing that David's hands were stained with blood, but that another man was proved innocent.

If David had slain Mardwin, then Hall Pembroke must be blameless and the temptation was removed from his life! With the death of the man the "decree of fate" was surely broken, and though all these tales of horror chilled Perham through and through, his heart was, at the same time, full of joy and gratitude.

"Saved! saved!" he murmured, thinking of Pembroke.

Quinn did not hear the words, and he practically added:

"I see you're upset. Stay here and get over it a bit, and then come around and see me. I must take our caged tigress to jail now."

He went out, and the minister fell upon his knees, and fervently thanked Providence that Hall Pembroke was saved. From that moment, he hoped, the temptation and the *Tempter* would be removed from the blacksmith's life.

He had barely risen, however, when he remembered that Esther had at last told her story, and as he could deny no part of it, Czarina's future looked dark—even if she was saved from her abductors. He was almost crushed by the misery which had come upon him since Mrs. Bastion arrived at Si Gotch. Until her arrival he had not known that she lived. Once, when Czarina was three years old, she had put in an appearance, but had been bribed to go away. She went, promising never to molest them again, but the promise had not been kept.

The minister began to pace the floor nervously.

While he was still in motion he heard some one else arrive, but he gave no heed until the door of his room opened. He looked up and saw—Czarina!

Yes; she stood at the door, as bright and

blooming as ever, and to him she had never looked more womanly. He uttered a loud cry, and in a moment more she was folded in his arms.

Tyrington Perham was affected as he had never been before, and it was some time before he could speak coherently, but she brought back his self-possession with her own inimitable grace. His heart was light and happy, and he suppressed his joy in many words, but when he grew calmer he asked how she had escaped.

"I owe it all to Mr. Jameson," she replied, a peculiar light in her eyes. "Dyckman Harrington and his men took Jessie and me from the Hollis cottage, and carried us to the Pits; but Mr. Jameson followed and came upon our captors in camp. Don't ask me much about that. There was a fight, and Harrington and some of his men were killed, the others being captured. Moving about in the Pits is so dangerous at night that we remained there until morning, and then came here. And, uncle, Mr. Jameson is in the other room, ready to see you."

"Bless me! bring the dear boy in."

"He has been very kind to me; I hope you will not forget that."

Czarina spoke with some confusion, and the strange new light in her eyes deepened; but Perham was not discerning enough to see or read it.

Had he been he might have suspected that, though Czarina was a "man-hater," she had decided to make an exception in favor of Saddle-Chief Kit.

The latter entered the room and was warmly received by Perham, but at the end of ten minutes they were interrupted by the arrival of a man, who gave a private message to the Centaur. The latter at once addressed Perham.

"You and I are wanted by Quinn, sir. If you will walk with me, I have something to say."

"Gladly, my boy; gladly!"

The minister made haste to find his hat, and they went out together.

"You will meet a stranger," observed Kit.

"A stranger?"

"Yes. On our way out of the Pits we came upon a hut with an old man sick within it. Con Byrd at once recognized him as Ambrose Gray, the man who was unjustly suspected of crime at Belated Camp, and was nearly killed by the lynchers, though his innocence has since been proved. Gray was very much frightened, but we were able to tell him that the real criminal had been found and he was cleared of all blame. Then, Perham, a peculiar story was revealed."

"What?"

"Gray, wounded and almost lifeless, fled from Belated Camp to a point near here, where he was happened upon by Czarina. He told his story, and all her pity was awakened. Guilty or innocent, he was a weak, wounded old man. She conducted him to the Pits—a slow, laborious journey for him—seeking a refuge, and they came upon an old hut built nobody knows when nor by whom; and there Gray has been ever since, slowly mending. More than this, Czarina has for three weeks secretly conveyed him food and necessary articles. Harp Moy knew a part of the secret, for he was once pressed into service to carry the supplies, but he imagined harmless Mr. Gray to be a 'demon,' or ghost, and, by Czarina's orders, kept silent. Now that Gray is known to be innocent all will applaud Czarina's conduct, but it takes you and me, Mr. Perham, to know how noble she is."

The minister was too confused to answer intelligently.

"Yes, yes; noble and good! We always knew it."

Their arrival at Quinn's quarters prevented further talk. They entered and saw an aged, long-bearded man reclining on a couch of blankets. He was thin and feeble, but had not the look of a dying man. His eyes lighted at sight of the minister, and he put out one hand.

"Tyrington Perham!" he uttered. "I should know you anywhere, but I dare say that you know me not."

"Did I ever meet you before?"

"Yes; carry your recollections back twenty years. Remember Giles Armitage!"

"Merciful Providence! are you he?"

"I am; you remember me now. You must recollect how Patrick O'Brien—the man who married Esther Harkins—came to our town fresh from prison, but claimed to be an honest man, and how I trusted him and engaged in business only to learn in the end that he had conducted it fraudulently. I, too, seemed to have been a rascal, and I lacked courage to face the law. I fled, and for all these years have been a wanderer under a false name, haunted by fear of the law. Now, however, the truth shall be known."

"But, cried Perham, "when O'Brien died in prison, he made a confession which exonerated you fully; he confessed that you were wholly innocent of wrong in the partnership affair!"

Giles Armitage clasped his thin hands.

"Just Heaven, I thank thee for thy mercies!" he murmured; then, suddenly arousing, he added: "So much for my case; now for another's. I hear that Mrs. Esther Bastion claims your

adopted daughter, Czarina, as her child, Bridget O'Brien?"

"Yes, she does!"

"She speaks falsely. Listen! At the time of my great misfortune I, too, had a daughter less than six months old. I had learned that, after Esther's flight, you were going to adopt her infant out of pity. It was in the charge of Mrs. Bowen, who lived in the house with me."

"She still lives."

"Then she can prove what I am about to say. Give heed to me! The infant, Bridget, died suddenly, and a plan to save my own child from suffering and neglect occurred to me. I pleaded with Mrs. Bowen, and she yielded. Secretly we buried little Bridget, and my child was put in its place. It was taken by you and reared by you. The Czarina King of to-day is not Bridget O'Brien, but Carlotta Armitage, my child!"

Perham stood dumb with joy.

"Neither you nor your sister had ever seen little Bridget, although you had promised that it should be cared for," added Armitage, "so the deception was easy. How wonderful are the workings of fate! When Czarina gave aid to the poor old man upon whom was the lynchers' brand, she little suspected he was her own father. I knew the truth, but kept silent until I knew, half an hour ago, that Esther had claimed her as her child. The claim is false, as can be proven by Mrs. Bowen."

Sheriff Quinn approached.

"We have got to put Mrs. Bastion under the influence of morphine," he said. "She is raving like a madwoman. With all her faults she fairly adored David, and now that she knows him guilty, by his own confession, of robbing the stage and killing Judah Mardwin, she is almost insane. Her crimes have fearfully recoiled upon herself."

A hand touched Perham's shoulder; he turned and saw Hall Pembroke.

"It is over," said the blacksmith, quietly. "Another hand than mine has slain Mardwin, and I am free from the curse. I feel sure that I shall never feel a murderous impulse again; never see the red mist, the pointing finger or the pantomimic command. I thank Heaven that I am a free man again!"

The minister wrung his hand.

"You do well," he fervently replied. "Your thanks are due to the just Providence which watches over us all."

"And to you," Pembroke added, deeply; "to you who struggled with me when I was helpless!"

"I am glad to have helped you, and have done my best, but the result has been with a Higher Power that, as we read in Holy Writ, 'will render to every man according to his deeds.' Out of sore tribulation have we all been led, and peace abides with them who deserve it."

"The way has been rocky," Kit Jameson agreed, "but the path has grown smooth, and we may all call ourselves lucky to a prodigious degree."

The situation at Si Gotch presented sharp contrasts that night. To Mardwin and Harrington, cold in death, there was only awe-inspiring silence and oblivion; to the Bastions there was humiliation, grief, gloom and fear. They had sown the wind and reaped the whirlwind.

To Hall Pembroke, Jessie and Mrs. Hollis in the cottage, there was happiness, deep and abundant; and in the parsonage, to Czarina, Mr. Perham, Kit and Giles Armitage, there was perfect content, though confusion had not yet left their minds. Not yet could Czarina realize that the old man of the Pits was her own dear father, but not a regret filled her mind.

Ten years later.

David Bastion was never tried for his crimes. He escaped, attempted robbery to get money for flight, and was shot dead. Mrs. Bastion, too, escaped trial for having the stolen letters in her possession; but a stroke of apoplexy suddenly ended her miserable life. Pansy was given permission to leave; she went, and was heard of no more. Mardwin and Harrington were buried at Si Gotch.

The confession of a subordinate revealed the fact that the bank had been robbed by Mardwin, Harrington and their men, and of the silver plate, which was put in Pembroke's shop to ruin him.

Sheriff Quinn was triumphant. He had stood by the blacksmith in all his troubles, and when the truth was known, the worthy officer was regarded as a Western Vidocq. At present he is Mayor of Si Gotch.

Pete Jordan lived to drive the stage many years, and every time he came in from a safe trip, Con Byrd insisted upon "washing the dust out of his throat."

Hall Pembroke was taken down with brain fever, and his physician declared that the trouble was coming upon him when he had the impulse to kill Mardwin. The case may rest on this medical opinion, though it did not explain the temptations of his ancestors. The blacksmith recovered; he married Jessie; they have lived happily ever since; and Pembroke, now

free from every trace of gloom, has never had an impulse to harm any one.

Czarina abandoned her position as a man-hater, and when, at the end of a few months, Kit Jameson asked for her hand in marriage, she did not hesitate over her reply. She became Mrs. Jameson, and has never regretted the step.

Mr. Armitage recovered a measure of health and still lives with his daughter; and he and Perham—now a retired preacher—are the best of friends. Mrs. Granger and Harp Moy remained in the family as servants, and they, from their position, agreed with more pretentious friends, that no kinder persons ever lived, nor any couple better suited to each other than Czarina and Saddle-Chief Kit.

THE END.

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